

“I think it’s just interesting to be able to communicate using  
foreign language”: Survey study on the learner beliefs of Finnish  
upper secondary students and their English oral skills

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Tutkimuksessa on tutkittu lukiolaisten uskomuksia, jotka liittyvät englannin kielen puhumiseen ja suulliseen kielitaitoon. Aiemmat tutkimukset kielitieteen alalta ovat osoittaneet oppilasuskomuksien vaikuttavan oppimistuloksiin, ja näin ollen uskomuksien tutkiminen on tärkeää, jotta uskomusten mahdolliset vaikutukset voidaan ottaa huomioon opetustyön suunnittelussa ja kehittämisessä. Suullisen kielitaidon merkitystä osana kielenhallintaa on tuotu esille jo useamman vuosikymmenen ajan, mutta mielikuva suomalaisista arkoina ja ujoina kommunikoijina on edelleen vahva. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää, vastaako tuo yleismielikuva nykynuorten käsitystä heistä itsestään kielenkäyttäjinä.

Tutkimuksen keskeisimpänä tavoitteena oli selvittää millaisia uskomuksia lukioikäisillä oppilailla on liittyen englannin suulliseen kielitaitoon. Tarkemmin tutkimuksessa selvitettiin, mitä kielenhallinnan taitoja oppilaat pitivät tärkeinä suullisen kielitaidon osalta. Lisäksi oppilaita pyydettiin analysoimaan omaa englannin kielen suullista kielitaitoaan nimeämällä omat vahvuutensa ja mahdolliset heikkoutensa englannin kielen puhujina. Koska tutkimus pyrki toimimaan tuottamaan opetustyön suunnittelun kannalta hyödyllistä tietoa, tutkimuksen tavoitteisiin kuului myös selvittää oppilaiden mielipiteitä opetussuunnitelmassa annetuista tavoitteista englannin suullisen kielitaidon oppimisen osalta.

Tutkimus on toteutettu kyselytutkimuksena ja siihen osallistui 48 lukion toisen vuosiluokan oppilasta. Kysely on yhdistelmä kysymyksiä, joihin on annettu valmiit vastausvaihtoehdot ja kysymyksiä, joihin vastaajat ovat voineet vastata vapaasti käyttäen omia sanojaan. Kyselyyn vastasi saman päivän aikana kahden eri ryhmän oppilaita ja molemmat ryhmät ohjeistettiin samalla tavoin kyselyyn vastaamista varten. Tutkimukseen vastanneet oppilaat olivat kaikki 17–19 –vuotiaita, ja osallistujien sukupuolijakauma oli tasainen.

Tulokset paljastivat, että oppilaat arvostavat suullisen kielitaidon osalta erityisesti hyvää kommunikointitaitoa. Sanastohallinta ja ääntämys nähtiin olennaisina osina hyvää suullista kielitaitoa. Vastaajat kokivat englannin kielen puhujina omaavansa erityisesti hyvät kommunikointitaidot, mutta halusivat parantaa sanastonhallintaansa ja ääntämystään. Kyselyn viimeisen osion vastaukset paljastivat, että oppilaat kokivat opetussuunnitelmassa heille asetetut tavoitteet kohtuullisina mutta että he vähentäisivät englannin kielen opetuksen kielioppipainotteisuutta.

Tulosten analysointi osoitti, että vastaajat oli mahdollista jaotella kolmeen eri puhujakategoriaan sen perusteella, millaisia uskomuksia heillä oli omista taidoistaan englannin kielen puhujina. Suurin osa vastaajista sijoittui kategoriaan, jossa vastaajilla on positiivinen kuva itsestään englannin kielen puhujina. Toiseksi suurin vastaajaryhmä muodostui 'epävarmoista' vastaajista, ja selvästi pienin osuus vastaajista sijoittui 'negatiivisten' ryhmään. Korrelaatioita tutkittaessa selvisi, että suurin osa 'positiivisten' ryhmästä koostui miespuolisista vastaajista. Vastaajan arvosana ei suoraan määritellyt mihin ryhmään vastaaja sijoittui: hyvän arvosanan saaneet saattoivat olla 'epävarmoja' ja keskitason arvosanan saaneilla saattoi olla positiivisia uskomuksia suullisista kielitaidoistaan. Englannista oppiaineena nauttivat oppilaat olivat muita tyytyväisimpiä taitoihinsa. Se, käyttikö vastaaja englannin kieltä aktiivisesti koulun ulkopuolella, ei vaikuttanut siihen, sijoittuiko vastaaja 'positiivisiin' vai 'epävarmoihin', mutta oli selvää, että

‘negatiiviseen’ ryhmään kuuluvat vastaajat käyttävät englantia muita vastaajia harvemmin koulun ulkopuolella.

Avainsanat: oppilasuskomukset, tunteet, suullinen kielitaito, kielen oppiminen, kommunikatiivinen kompetenssi

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<b>Key words:</b> learner beliefs, emotions, oral skills, language learning, communicational competence	

## Introduction

As a teacher one comes across different personalities, student backgrounds and various environments. All of these are also effected by the time and the world we live in. Teachers are expected to help and enable homogeneous groups of students to learn and acquire new skills and at the same time there are many variables (e.g. time and other contexts) making this task even more challenging. One such variable is the beliefs the students hold about learning, themselves and even about society which surrounds them. To understand the students better and to help their acquisition process, this study aims at discovering new information concerning learner beliefs.

This pro gradu thesis investigates Finnish upper secondary school students' beliefs about their oral skills in English. One of the main aims is to find out what kind of learner beliefs are currently dominant amongst students studying English as a foreign language (hereafter EFL). Oral skills is only one component of language competence, but in a world that is becoming more and more global where people are more mobile than before, it is increasingly important for EFL learners to have the skills for oral communication. The aim is to find out if there are aspects related to oral skills which cause problems for students as beliefs about one's skills may result in “student-related outcomes” as Zysberg writes (in Zysberg ed. 2012, 8).

Sallinen-Kuparinen and McCroskey (1991, 57) state that Finns are traditionally seen as introverts who “hold a low communicator image of themselves” and the results of their study seem to support this image of Finns. However, the participants rated themselves as competent communicators which is something that conflicts with their statement about having “low communicator image”. This study was carried out 25 years ago and much has happened in Finland since: Finland became member of the European Union in 1994 which made Finland a part of an international community which “encourages all citizens to be multilingual” (Special Eurobarometer 386: Europeans and their Languages 2012, 2).

The increased use of the Internet and social media offers more opportunities to use foreign language skills on a more daily basis, but this was not the case 25 years ago. Special

Eurobarometer, which was conducted in 2012, reveals that the Europeans' use of a foreign language on the Internet has increased by 10 per cent in the seven-year period between 2005 and 2012 (46, 2012). Storhammar and Ailiniemi (1995, 25) report that in their study from 1995 Finnish second year upper secondary school students used English outside school mostly if they travelled outside Finland or if they were in letter correspondence with a non-Finnish speaker. The use of the Internet was not included in Storhammar and Ailiniemi's study and this goes to show that much has happened since the year Finland joined the EU.

In addition, there has been a clear change in the Finnish population structure when it comes to speakers of different languages: in 1990 the percentage of Finnish speakers was 93.6 per cent and only 0.5 per cent of the population spoke another language than Swedish or Same as their native tongue. The statistics from 2013 show very different numbers: 89.3 per cent of the population were Finnish speakers and 5.3 per cent other languages speakers ([http://www.stat.fi/til/vaerak/2013/vaerak\\_2013\\_2014-03-21\\_tau\\_001\\_fi.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/vaerak/2013/vaerak_2013_2014-03-21_tau_001_fi.html)). Even though Finland is still fairly homogenous when it comes to speakers of different languages, the increase of foreign language speakers would seem to suggest that Finland has definitely become a more international living environment.

Another notable difference between Sallinen-Kuparinen and McCrokey's study (1991, 58) and this thesis is that the participants answered questions in relation to their first language and they used their first language when answering, which will not be the case in this study and thus, results may be very different as the context of this study is quite different from their study.

Special Eurobarometer 386 shows that 88 per cent of the Finnish participants consider English to be useful to their personal development (2012, 70). Only 17 per cent have replied "I'm not good at languages" to be a reason why they would not learn another language (2012, 96). This data would seem to suggest that the general sentiment towards learning English and other foreign languages is positive in Finland. However, it is not certain that this agrees with the beliefs that Finns have about their *ability* to interact in a foreign language.

Asking Finnish upper secondary school students about the beliefs they have about their English oral skills is a current issue: the Matriculation Examination Board has announced that an oral skill examination should become a part of the matriculation examination of English and other first foreign language examinations by 2019 (Helsingin Sanomat 12.6.2013). At the moment, upper secondary school students are able to take a course which focuses on oral skills and which has the National Oral Examination as an obligatory part of the course, but the taking the course is still voluntary. As the situation is changing and all students' oral skills will be evaluated in the future, it is important to aim at finding out whether there are beliefs which might affect the students' ability to interact orally in English. Thus, the main research question for this study is:

- What kind of beliefs do Finnish upper secondary students have about their English oral skills?

Another goal for this study is to discover if there are issues, according to the students, which should be taken into consideration in the planning of language teaching and goals set for the students. The subquestions of this study are as follows:

- Which aspects of oral skills do students consider important when it comes to oral skills in English?
- What do students believe are their strengths and weaknesses when it comes to speaking in English?
- What do the participants think about the goals that are set for them by the *Finnish National Curriculum* and *CEFR*?

The goals of the *Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools 2003* are based on the descriptions given in *Common European Framework of References for Languages*, hereafter *CEFR*. The *National Curriculum* and *CEFR* are official documents regulating foreign language teaching in Finland and therefore, looking into what students think about their goals could prove beneficial to Finnish foreign language teachers as well as to Finnish education officials.

*The Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools, CEFR and*

background information on learner beliefs will be dealt with in closer detail in the following section before introducing the subjects of the study and the methods used in the process of this study. Finally, analysis and results of the survey study carried out for the purposes of this thesis will be presented.

## **2. Background**

This section introduces the background information for this study. Background information includes a quick look into *the Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools* and what kind of goals it sets for foreign language teaching. Introducing the curriculum is important as it creates the main context for language teaching in Finland. The new national curriculum will be taken into use in the autumn 2016, but this thesis will focus on the curriculum from the year 2003. Reason for this being that the subjects of the study have only been influenced by the 2003 curriculum. Also, the goals of the new curriculum do not differ greatly from the goals set already in the 2003 curriculum: the students are still expected to reach the competence level B 2.1 which is defined in *CEFR (the Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools 2015, 108)*. As the student evaluation and the goals of the curriculum are heavily based on the *Common European Framework of References*, it will also be introduced.

*The Finnish National Curriculum* and *CEFR* form an essential part of the context surrounding this study and thus this part is introduced later as a sort of an introduction the actual study itself. The first part of the background section introduces the main focus of this study: beliefs. Beliefs that have an influence in the classroom do not all come from a single source, but beliefs of students, teachers and even of society are present whenever entering a classroom. Theory of beliefs is dealt by introducing different perspectives on the matter, but as this study investigates beliefs of students, learner beliefs deserve more special attention.



## 2.1 Beliefs

Different dictionaries give several different definitions for the noun *belief*. *Oxford English Dictionary* describes *belief* (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “belief” n. 2.) a ‘mental action, condition, or habit of trusting to or having confidence in a person or thing; trust, dependence, reliance, confidence, faith’. *Merriam-Webster* (*Merriam-Webster.com*, “belief” n. 3.) says that *belief* is ‘a feeling of being sure that someone or something exists or that something is true’. This section provides a closer look into what beliefs actually are and what the mechanism behind the construction of beliefs in general is.

Understanding what beliefs are in fact is important from the point of view of this study. Theories concerning beliefs agree with the dictionary definitions presented above: Bertrand Russell states that believing is a mental act (1921, 231). Beliefs have been viewed from various perspectives and Reichenbach (2012, 180-190) states that “one contemporary view is that belief is only a behavioral disposition” while another perspective states that it is an action. Stating that believing is an action means that it is something that makes us do something and that we have control over it. Reichenbach (2012, 191) states, however, that “we are unaware of all the causal factors that affect our choices and actions and of the extent to which they influence us”. Hence, it would seem that beliefs are dispositions. According to this view believing is not a mental “happening”, but our beliefs guide our actions. Reichenbach (2012, 181) claims that we cannot know our beliefs, but we can observe them through our actions. Thus, “beliefs are a readiness to act”.

Nilsen (2014, 12) agrees with Reichenbach and states that beliefs guide our decision-making process when it comes to making decisions about education and career choice, for example. As this study focuses on upper secondary school student's beliefs about English oral skills, it is clear that students' beliefs about their skills could guide them when they are deciding what to do during and after upper secondary school. In the worst case scenario students could end up making choices they are not actually happy with, but they feel that they are forced to make them because their

beliefs suggest so. To quote a saying used by Nilsen (2014, 20): “whether you believe you can or believe you cannot, you're probably right”.

Gilbert (1991, 107-108) states that having a belief is a process which comprises of two parts: comprehension and assessment of an idea. Which happens first is matter that is debatable as there are two opposites which argue the process to happen in two different ways: the Cartesian and the Spinozan procedure. The Cartesian procedure, which follows the logic presented by René Descartes, separates the two parts because “one must comprehend an idea before one can assess it”. The Spinozan procedure, named after its creator Baruch Spinoza, again, includes assessment as a part of the comprehension process as “person had implicitly to accept - - proposition; only later, if the person realized that this proposition conflicted with some other, might he or she change his or her mind”. Gilbert says that even though all ideas are initially accepted in the Spinozan procedure, they can be discarded later: acceptance precedes disbelieving an idea. What the two procedures have in common is that they both assume that an idea must be considered to be true so that it can be called a belief as the dictionary definition given by Merriam-Webster also states. (Gilbert, 1991, 108-113).

Gilbert continues by stating that Spinoza proposed that “all ideas are mere beliefs” and therefore, the two concepts should be considered basically the same thing (1991, 108). The Cartesian procedure seems to assume that an idea is turned into a belief once one has assessed and comprehended it. Nilsen (2014, xii) seems to agree with Spinoza as he mentions that it is difficult to set apart what can be called knowledge and what should be considered belief. According to Nilsen (ibid.) some epistemologists wish to argue that there is a clear distinction between the two concepts as “beliefs might not represent “reality” faithfully, whereas knowledge must”. Nilsen (ibid.) questions whether it is even possible to represent reality faithfully in the form of words and thus, making a distinction between the two seems quite impossible.

Nilsen (2014, 3) also follows along Spinoza's lines by saying that beliefs are not stable, but can change according to new information one receives. In the Spinozan procedure

assessment stage defines whether to accept something to be true on the basis of the newest information one has and the information that has preceded the newest information. What could be defined as knowledge based on beliefs, is “declarative” according to cognitive scientists; “knowledge represented by beliefs is called “declarative” because beliefs are stated as declarative sentences” (Nilsen 2014, 3). Nilsen (2014, 11) uses even diagnosis made by doctors as an example of beliefs: they are based on information that is gained through scientific research, but still they are beliefs. This is something that could be called an educated guess in layman's terms. Thus, something that seems to be knowledge can be deconstructed and redefined as a set of beliefs.

Even if it was well justified that knowledge about something could be renamed as a set of beliefs, there are scientists who might disagree. Nilsen (2014, 78) writes that scientific facts are still reachable regardless of stating that it is hard to separate knowledge and belief. Scientific facts are gained by using the scientific method which requires the use of several theories and testing them. If the theories can be repeatedly be proven accurate through careful observation they can be declared facts.

Albert Einstein (in *Ideas and Opinions by Albert Einstein* 1954, 290) has stated that “the whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking”. For the target audience (mainly foreign language teachers and second language learners) of this study this is a statement that should be taken into consideration. Einstein's words function as a reminder that using the scientific method is not restricted to be only used by scientists. By testing one's beliefs and declarative knowledge using the scientific method, it is possible to either affirm one's beliefs or prove them wrong. For example, when someone says “I cannot speak English” or “I know less than 100 words in English”, a teacher could guide the student to use the scientific method to actually prove whether or not they can speak English. Scientific thinking should be taught as a cognitive skill which the students could utilize even when solving simple problems: when a student says they cannot say something in English as they lack a word they think is crucial to make their point, a teacher could ask the student to test this belief (in the scientific method this would be the

hypothesis) by telling the student to try explaining what they want to say without using the word. After the student has tried to make their way around the missing word, the student and the teacher could evaluate together whether or not the student has been successful in expressing what they wanted to say. The role of declarative knowledge could be an important when a student forms an image of their skills and capabilities.

Testing one's knowledge and beliefs is a skill that is not inherent, but learnt. Gilbert (1991, 110-111) mentions that children can be impressionable and might very literally believe something that is said to them. The ability to question statements is something that is learned via life experience, and children learn to observe that not all statements are accurate and coherent with the reality they exist in. To back their statement Gilbert states that there is linguist evidence which proves this: “very young children may use the word *no* to indicate rejection or nonexistence, the denial word is not mastered until quite a bit later”.

It is reasonable to assume that early childhood experiences play an important role in the development of learner's self-image on the basis of Gilbert's previous statement. Children can be more easily affected by statements made by adults about their skills. Only later in life they develop the cognitive skills to question these statements, but the earlier experiences might have already affected their learning results, for example, in a positive or a negative way. This is one reason why the subjects of this study were asked to describe any significant experiences they have had concerning speaking in English because their learning might have been affected this way.

As has been explained earlier, beliefs can be based on observations (scientific method), but Nilsen (2014, 22) mentions that there is another method as well: we invent “explanations for and deriving consequences from what we already believe”. Even if our beliefs are based on something, i.e. they have a source, Nilsen (2014, 31) states that the way these explanations construct in our brains is still not fully understood by neuropsychology and neuroscience which are the fields under which investigating this process falls into. The mechanical process itself is still somewhat a mystery, but it is possible to affect these beliefs. After this more general insight into

beliefs, next section will focus on learner beliefs.

### 2.1.1 Learner beliefs

This section focuses on learners and on their beliefs related to learning. Learner beliefs are discussed from the point of view of language learning as this study focuses on the role of learner beliefs in language learning, and to be more specific in EFL (or in Second Language Acquisition, hereafter SLA. SLA will be used interchangeably with EFL). The use of the term *learner beliefs about SLA* is not completely straightforward as Barcelos (2003, 8) writes that “several terms have been used to refer to beliefs -- *learner representations* (Holec 1987) -- *metacognitive knowledge* (Wenden 1987), -- *learning culture* (Riley 1997) *cultural beliefs* (Gardner 1988) --”.

If it is agreed that the used term will be *learner beliefs* then several definitions of the term's meaning follow: Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005, 1) call learner beliefs “personal myths about learning”. They state that each individual has their own personal beliefs about learning which they carry with them into a classroom. Even if each individual has their unique learner beliefs, this study is interested in finding out if there are any similarities or consistencies in the learner beliefs of the students who have participated in the survey. Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005, 2) suggest that learner beliefs are a part of a person’s metacognitive system which refers to a person’s understanding of their ability to learn and goals related to learning. In the survey conducted for this study students are asked to explain the beliefs located in their metacognitive systems and to evaluate the best ways in which they learn and which experiences have helped them to develop their skills (Appendix 1 p. 6).

Carrying out studies about learner beliefs is an important task as previous study seems to suggest that learner beliefs are tightly connected to the learning process. Mercer (2011, 335) states that “various self-related beliefs have also been recognised as being central to successful language learning and are often a key variable in a range of studies and models of language acquisition”. Ellis reports that an earlier study has shown that two students’ different views on a target language the students were studying might have been a factor that explained their English

exam results (Abraham and Vann 1987 in Ellis 2008, 11). Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005, 3) mention that beliefs are connected to levels of expectancy in terms of successful learning and in ability to perform given tasks. Ellis (2008, 7) agrees by stating that “beliefs influence both the process and product of learning”.

The role of learner beliefs is important to realise not only because they may affect learning results, but also because changing and affecting students' beliefs about themselves might be a challenging task: Gilbert (1988, 692) writes that we often do not take into consideration situational constraints, such as facts, environment, time etc., which might affect what we come to believe. Gilbert (1988, 685) also states that correction “seems to be an effortful, deliberate form of reasoning that requires a significant expenditure of cognitive resources”. By combining these statements it can be assumed that learners can often be blinded by certain situational factors as they estimate their skills and correcting these estimations to reflect the learner's actual skills might be difficult as it requires significant resources.

Barcelos (2003, 11) mentions that learner beliefs have been studied by using three different approaches: *normative*, *metacognitive* and *contextual approach*. The approaches and the theories concerning them are largely based on the way they are dealt with in Barcelos and Kalaja's *Beliefs about SLA: New Research Approaches* (2003) because they are referenced frequently in other studies on learner beliefs and it presents the views which are current in the field of learner belief studies.

The *normative approach* aims at making generalisations on the basis of collected data, as the name suggests, and students' beliefs are described often erroneous or counterproductive as most of the time, the students' beliefs do not agree with the opinions of second language scholars. Barcelos (2003, 11) states that “the implicit assumption is that students' beliefs are wrong or false and that the opinions of scholars are right”. One popular example the *normative approach* is the BALLI Survey; Horwitz developed the BALLI Survey (= Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory) first in the mid-1980s (see Horwitz 1985 and Appendix 2) which Nikitina and Furuoka

(211, 2006) criticise for only having “statements dealing with learners’ beliefs -- generated by language teachers, not by learners themselves”. The BALLI Survey has been popular in the study of learner beliefs with its Likert scale rating system. Barcelos (2003, 11) states that questionnaires are the preferred study method within the *normative approach*. Nikitina and Furuoka's notion about the BALLI Survey does support Barcelos' view about the *normative approach*: this approach seems to forget its study subject, the student, to some extent and is more researcher-centered. Barcelos (2003, 15) states that the use of questionnaires is an insufficient method to grasp the learner's innermost thoughts and their “beliefs are measured out of context” if their actions are not observed.

Barcelos' description of the *normative approach* sounds critical and condemning. Partly, the criticism seems to arise from the assumption within the *normative approach* that learner beliefs are stable and unchanging constructions. In the previous section, the nature of beliefs was already discussed and even though changes in beliefs seems to require more work than accepting new ideas, it seems that the nature beliefs cannot not be assumed to be completely stable. There are different kinds of beliefs and the stability of a belief may depend on the type of belief it represents. The case of learner beliefs is not straightforward when it comes to the stability of these beliefs. Hosenfeld (2003, 39) expresses an interest in investigating changes in learner beliefs and states that learner beliefs may “arise during learning, in contrast to stable beliefs, which learner holds in mind, and brings to learning.” Ellis (2008, 2) has a similar dual view about the nature of learner beliefs and states that there are *cognitive* and *affective beliefs*: the *cognitive beliefs* are beliefs about how language should be learned and they are more stable. The *affective beliefs* refer to beliefs which are related to emotions and learning Ellis (2008, 22) states “changes in affective beliefs are common”.

Barcelos (2003, 16) explains that the *metacognitive approach* considers learner beliefs to be metacognitive knowledge. Barcelos (ibid.) continues by stating that metacognitive knowledge is considered to be stable knowledge and not always correct. Barcelos (2003, 19) criticises this approach for not taking the learners context into consideration as it only recognises beliefs as subjective products of the human mind. The advantage of this approach is, according to Barcelos

(ibid.), that instead of questionnaires the data is collected by using semi-structured interviews and self-reports, although questionnaires might be used as well.

The most recent approach in the study of learner beliefs is the *contextual approach* which consists of “heterogeneous group” of studies. What is in common with these studies is the goal to gather information about beliefs in specific contexts instead of making generalisations about them. The *contextual approach* seems to focus on more ethnographic research and factors such as environment, time and other people, and these factors are considered as sources of learner beliefs. This approach is student-centered and sees “beliefs as contextual, dynamic and social” constructs. (Barcelos 2003, 19-21). This approach differs from the other approaches by focusing on the importance of the context as “knowledge (or thinking) is situated” (Barcelos 2003, 24). According to this view, the nature of beliefs is that they are going through constant changes. These changes are caused by the environment (physical and mental) the learner is situated in. Barcelos (2003, 25) states that the limitation of this approach is that it is rather time-consuming.

When choosing an approach for this study, the attitude of each approach towards beliefs and towards the subjects of its study, the students, was carefully taken into consideration: the *normative approach* seems paradoxical in the sense that the object of interest’s, the students, opinions appear to be unappreciated and the researchers’ expertise is considered to be superior. This attitude towards the students is problematic because the relationship between knowledge and belief is vague, as was discussed in the earlier sections, and it can be questioned whether knowledge is anything else but a well-justified set of beliefs. Thus, having knowledge or expert information seems overrated when investigating beliefs. Language experts can be expected to have a fair amount of knowledge about the subject of their study, but investigating beliefs is not the same as studying a physical phenomenon such as the behavior of different floor panel materials in different temperatures, for example. Beliefs are subjective to their holder and investigating them objectively might be challenging. The researcher's own beliefs and attitudes are likely to affect the way they construct a questionnaire.



The *metacognitive approach* seems to emphasize the relationship between learner beliefs and the way these beliefs affect students actions: Wenden (1987, 7), who favours the *metacognitive approach* (Barcelos 2003, 16), speaks of learner strategies which are “personal factors” helping L2 learning (L2 and second language will be used interchangeably hereafter). Speaking of strategies makes the approach appear to be focused on actions that the learner uses, i.e. action related to learning. As noted earlier, beliefs have been detected to have an effect on our actions and the way we learn.

This study fails to follow any of the aforementioned approaches fully, but combines certain features of each approach: Barcelos (2003, 25) mentions that several different methods are used within the *contextual approach* and thus, the approach used in this study is *contextual*, but with a *normative* aspect. The *normative* aspect comes from the use of the questionnaire and it used for the reason which Kramsch (2003, 110) calls “the modern paradigm -- which seeks to make explicit the tacit assumptions behind -- learner's statements”. The goal of making generalisations derives from the hope that this study could help teachers and learners to understand the beliefs which may guide the learning processes happening in the classroom. Having said that, this study's aim is not to “cover up the inconsistency and variability of beliefs” (Kramsch 2003, 111), but to see if there are detectable consistencies among the answers.

The approach of this study could be mistaken for the *normative approach* at first glance, however, the assumption about the nature of beliefs is that they are not stable, but dynamic propositions. As the nature of beliefs appears to be unstable, the use the *metacognitive approach* was also ruled out as well. The reason the research methods such as observation and interviews, which are usually linked to the *contextual approach*, were not chosen was determined by the limited resources of this study and the goal of making generalisations as just stated above. Later the sections 4.2 and 4.5 explain the choices made when designing and executing this study in more detail. What is not ignored and is taken from the *contextual approach*, is that the results are tied to their context. As an example, the students are asked to recall their experiences which have to do

with learning English as an attempt to take their personal contexts into consideration. Also, the students are asked to review the goals which are set for them in the national curriculum and which form an important part of their L2 learning context. The section 2.2 will focus on explaining the context which the curriculum creates. The following section will deal with the learner's contexts and how those contexts affect the learners' beliefs.

### **2.1.2 Learner's context**

As this study has chosen to take the view that learner's context has a great influence on their beliefs, this section briefly discusses the various external factors which generally form the learner's context. These contexts include the time we live in, the people involved in the learning processes, the learner's culture and the surrounding society. As Barcelos and Kalaja (2011, 285) state about beliefs: "they are context-dependent, in a number of cases variable even within one and the same context or over time and at the same time constant".

The classroom context is an essential part of L2 learning and teachers' role becomes important in that context. Comparisons between students' and teachers' beliefs reveal differences between the two groups. Brown (2009, 53) reports that in his study students considered formal and explicit grammar teaching to suit them best while the teachers responses showed that they would rather use "real-life contexts" for grammar teaching. Beliefs such as these demonstrate the clashes that might exist between students' and teachers' beliefs about learning. Also, Brown (2009, 54) states that students wished to be corrected immediately if they made an error in their oral output while the teachers did not see that as important. Teachers plan their lessons on the basis of their beliefs about which teaching practices are the best while again the students act and succeed in their learning on the basis of their beliefs about learning. If the students do not believe that they can learn a grammatical construction by reading a newspaper article, for example, learning might not be successful. The student might also be confused about what he or she is expected to learn when they are presented with authentic material, such as a newspaper article, instead of a textbook where the

grammar construction under study is explicitly stated. When the students do not understand what is expected of them or they do not believe the teaching method is the best, this will likely lead into a failure in learning.

The contradictions between the students' and teachers' beliefs raise a question why there is such a gap between the teachers' and students' beliefs. I will suggest here that there could be a couple of factors which might cause the birth of the gap: the teachers and students live in different kind of contexts. L2 teachers are usually older than their students, they have gone through formal pedagogical education process and could, thus, be considered to be experts in the way their field(s) of interest(s) should be taught. Because of their educational status, L2 teachers could be expected to be highly proficient in their target language, which can be in stark contrast with their students who are still aiming to become more proficient.

Teachers' proficiency level might not be the only affective factor: Hu and Tian's (2012, 242-244) study suggests that the students' own proficiency levels affects their beliefs. The study's results show that teachers believe that strategies used at the beginner level are no longer effective at the advanced level. The students at the beginner level disagreed the most with the teachers and the strategies that they use. The study shows that there was a clear change in the students' beliefs after they had reached the intermediate proficiency level and they began to see the effectiveness of the strategies the teachers had used earlier. Teachers might use different strategies and the students might not believe they are effective, but the students' attitudes and beliefs might change after they realise what they have learned and how they have advanced using the strategies.

The students' age could also play a role in their preferred learning styles. Students in Brown's (2009) were adult learners aged between 21 and 35 years. The students of this study are a little younger as most of the participants are 17 years old. Menn (2010, 344) explains that learning one's first language changes "your brain substantially" and "the emotions, motivation, and the opportunities to learn" another language differ from first language acquisition. This is especially the case with older children and adult learners. By stating that learning L1 is an acquisition process

means here that the learning process does not require similar conscious effort as L2 learning does. Using a more communicative teaching style in which grammar, for example, is taught more subtly by studying different sentence structures within a newspaper article might prove challenging for older students as their language learning process of an L2 is different from L1 acquisition: it requires a conscious effort to understand the underlying structure which is being studied and might be challenging as the first language acquisition process has effected the brains by “strengthening some connections greatly while weakening others or disrupting them entirely” (Menn 2010, 344).

On the basis of Brown's (2009) and Hu and Tian's (2012) study it appears that the role of the teacher is important in the formation of learner beliefs as there are clear differences between what the students believe and what the teachers believe. Yang (1999, 532) suggests that the teachers should explain to the students what the process of second language learning is like to “remove students' misconceptions” concerning it. This suggestion seems important and relevant, but I would like to suggest that this would be done in a way that respects the students beliefs or possible misconceptions; the teacher is a part of the students second language learning context, but the teachers need to take into consideration that the students might be held up by other contexts such as age and proficiency as well.

The classroom (and the other contexts related to the students) is not the only learning context which could have an important position in the formation of learner beliefs as the classroom is surrounded by a bigger context: the culture and society it is situated in. As this study has been conducted in Finland, the role of society as an influencing factor on learner beliefs is dealt from the Finnish perspective. Sallinen-Kuparinen and McCroskey's (1991) study, which was mentioned in the introduction, reveals that the Finnish have a low communicator image and there is still a persistent image of the quiet Finn. As was also mentioned earlier, the study is 25 years old and the Finnish society has changed since towards a more international and internationally active society. Wilkins and Isotalus (2009, 7) mention that there are signs of a shift towards a more positive communicator image as the students evaluate their communicational skills good. They also mention

that Finnish youth has received confused attention from the newspapers because of their keen interest to “perform publicly” and that they are interested in appearing in reality television shows. This could be another sign of the changes happening to the Finnish communicator image.

Despite the fact that there signs of a more positive communicator image, some of the features unique to Finnish communication could cause confusion when learning other languages than Finnish. Carbaugh (2009, 45) mentions that “every communication system includes, symbols, and gestures which are used to comment upon that system”. Carbaugh (2009, 51-58) continues by stating that for the Finnish part of this communication system and part of the Finnish identity is not being talkative and the reason for the Finnish quietude is the respect it shows towards others: keeping a distance (by not interrupting someone, for example) is a signal of giving space to the other communicator. This kind of attitude is a stark contrast to the conversation culture considered typical for the native speakers of English. While a Finn might keep quiet while the other one is talking, a native English speaker might feel obliged to utter backchannels and short comments during someone's speech turn to show that they are listening and they aim to be polite in this way.

Barraclough, Christophel and McCroskey (1988, 188) refer to this kind of difference in the communicational behavior as a difference in *Willingness to Communicate* which is a concept that refers to “an individual general personality orientation towards talking”. The role of culture in *Willingness to Communicate* is “expected to operate more at a trait than a situational level” (ibid.). Hence, Finns may be more talkative in some contexts than in others, but cultural differences may be apparent in certain communication situations.

To widen the perspective a little further from the Finnish society, it should be noted that, as was mentioned earlier, Finland of today is a member of international communities such as the EU. Also, Finnish students are EFL students and the English speakers in Finland are part of the larger English speaking community. Kachru (1985, 12) has introduced his model of three circles of English speakers and in this division of the inner, outer and expanding circle, the Finns place in the expanding circle. The inner circle refers to native speakers in the United Kingdom, North America,

Australia and New Zealand. Kachru (ibid.) considers that English is the primary language of these countries while the outer circle includes countries such as India and Nigeria where English has an official status and it used in education, administration and other official contexts, but it is not seen as a native language to that country. The expanding circle refers to all other countries where English is used, but it is not widely used in official contexts.

Even though this is not the only model presented to depict the spread of English in the world (see Graddol 1997, 10, for example) it does reflect the position given to the non-native speakers of English. Ke and Cahayni (2009, 29) state:

“Despite the fact that English has been called ‘an international language’ in the mass media and public discourse for quite some time, in the realm of English education in non-English-speaking countries, English has still been taught as a foreign language, a language belonging to the United States or the United Kingdom”.

In Kachru's model the “native speakers” are at the center, but the model seems to suggest that that Indian or Nigerian speakers, for example, could not be considered to be part of the inner circle even though they would have acquired English as their first language. However, in some these countries English has begun to develop into its own variety as the language is widely used in various contexts (e.g. Jamaica, Singapore).

The expanding circle speakers, and amongst them the Finns, are furthest from the inner circle countries and in these countries English is a foreign language as it does not have an official status. This set up could offer an explanation for Ke and Cahayni's statement. To help break down the idealisation of the native speaker, Ke and Cahayni (ibid.) suggest that the teaching of English should “include international cultures, world cultures, and local cultures so that they can encompass the ‘hybrid’ and ‘dynamic’ nature of ELF at individual, discursive, and community levels”. Ke and Cahayni's suggestion that international cultures should be taught is supported by what Graddol's model of the distribution of the English speakers (1997, 10) predicts: “‘centre of gravity’ will shift towards L2 speakers at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. The shift is caused by the growing number of L2 speakers. Graddol (1997, 33) also makes an observation which furthermore justifies why there should be a shift from imitating the inner circle speakers to teaching more

international communication in the international and global environment we live in: “rather than a process which leads to uniformity and homogeneity, globalisation seems to create new, hybrid forms of culture, language and political organisation”.

This kind of empowerment of the non-native speaker could have positive effects on the learner beliefs of the students located in the expanding circle in Kachru's model as their communicational competence in English would no longer be compared and assessed in relation to the inner circle speaker. The Finnish speakers' communicational habits differ from those of the UK or USA speakers. If the students are taught to accept those differences and to embrace their own cultural habits, the students could actually become fluent and daring language users.

As Alexander (1999, 25) encourages “people need not 'think' English to speak English!”. Next section will discuss the role of the Finnish National Curriculum in detail as it is one of the main contexts for teaching and learning English for the subjects of this study.

## ***2.2 The Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools and Common European Framework of References (CEFR)***

*The Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools* is a foundation for all teaching done in Finnish upper secondary schools. The curriculum is designed by the Finnish National Board of Education in co-operation with several other educational instances. The curriculum describes and defines the goals that are set for teaching given in different school subjects. *The Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools* is a part of the learner's context and thus it could have potential effects on learner beliefs of Finnish students: it is shaped by the ideas and ideologies its creators have about language learning. These ideologies define the goals for the language learning and teaching processes and are thus reflected in what happens in the classroom. This argument can be justified with de Costa's (2011, 352) finding: “language ideologies about English -- were contextually embedded and shaped by a national English language syllabus”. de Costa examined the language ideologies held by Chinese EFL students and their teacher and how these ideologies effected learner beliefs. When interviewing the teacher, de Costa (ibid.) found out that the teacher's

main goal for her students was for them to have “good English” and this agreed with the national syllabus which states that learners should be able to communicate in “internationally acceptable English”. Thus, even if the students in Finland or in China were not aware of what is stated in the national curriculum, the language ideologies embedded in them can still effect the students via the teaching which they are exposed to.

As was mentioned earlier in the introduction, the Finnish upper secondary students are able to take a course in English which is dedicated to developing oral skills. *The Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools* was altered in 2010 and this course became a part of the curriculum as well as the ruling that the National Oral Examination is an obligatory part of the course and its evaluation (press release by the Finnish National Board of Education 18 May 2010, 1). This is one indicator that there has been a trend in the 21<sup>st</sup> to emphasize the importance of oral skills in foreign language education. Salo-Lee states that already in the 1990s developing students' oral skills has been an important goal for Finnish foreign language teaching as there were several projects initiated by the Ministry of Education to improve the teaching oral skills (in Salo-Lee ed.1995, 153).

*The Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools* (2003, 100) states that the goal for upper secondary school students is to reach the level of B 2.1 in spoken skills of English if they have begun studying English in primary school. That is the case with the students participating in this study. The level B 2.1 refers to the model presented in *CEFR* which explains and defines what the requirements are that need to be met to reach each of the competence levels. To reach level B 2.1 in spoken skills a student needs: to be able to “interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible” and to “take part an active part in discussion in familiar context accounting for and sustaining -- views”, to be able to give “clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects which relates to something that they are interested in”, to be able to “to explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the disadvantages and advantages of various options” (*CEFR* 2003, 27).



This study asks which aspects of oral skills are important according to the participant and purpose of the question is to reveal what is considered necessary to be competent in communication happening in English. *CEFR* defines that the *communicative language competence* is consists of three other competencies: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Linguistic competence refers to a person's knowledge of the grammar and rules of the target language whereas "sociolinguistic competence is concerned with the knowledge and skills required to deal with the social dimension of language use". Pragmatic competence refers to a person's ability to structure, deliver and design their messages. (*CEFR* 2003, 109-123). *CEFR* does not specify that any of these competences should be emphasized in teaching.

## **2.3 Oral Skills**

While the main focus of this study is on learner beliefs, the second component that this thesis is investigating is oral skills. Speaking a language is a demanding task: one needs to be able to adapt the grammar of the language into their output and at the same time to find the appropriate word choices from their vocabulary which are suitable for the context where the speech event takes places. All of this should be done using gestures and other body signals which support the message of the speech turn. Grammar, vocabulary and pragmatic skills (use of gestures and making context-appropriate linguistic choices) are all a natural part of the first language acquisition process and they do not necessarily require conscious mental process while speaking, but that is not the case of for L2 learners, especially if one is at the beginner level. In this section the matter of teaching and learning oral skills and *communicative competence* is dealt from the perspective of L2 learning and teaching in general.

### **2.3.1 Teaching oral skills in L2**

Teaching a language is not a fixed process with specific and universal directions, but there are several approaches that can be chosen to teach language skills. Zhang and Rahimi (2014, 429) state

that there are two popular and common teaching approaches in language teaching: meaning-focused and form-focused approach. Zhang and Rahimi (ibid.) explain that meaning-focused approach “focuses on the effectiveness of negotiation of meaning and communication” and is not too concerned about the correctness of the language. The form-focused approach has an emphasis on teaching explicit forms, in other words grammar.

Whyatt (2009, 382) argues that there is a way to combine these two approaches.

According to Whyatt (ibid.) translation tasks are functional exercises:

“in which the translator (here L2 learner) has to get involved into the intricate negotiation between meaning (content) and form (lexical items and grammar rules) and the forms become assessed, selected or rejected according to whether or not they manage to activate the desired contextually appropriate meaning”.

This could be the case when the focus of teaching is on written skills, but speaking a language is different kind of process: speech is very slow if it involves translation from L1 to L2 as translation takes time and requires certain deliberations such as determining which form to use, as Whyatt states. However, slow speech and the help of translating from L1 are understandable at the beginner stages of language learning as there be might words or structures in L1 which are similar to the words and structures in L2. Translating while speaking might also lead to interference of L1 to L2. Shastri (2010, 25) notes that negative interference from L1 could lead to making errors in L2.

Error correction is a debatable issue in language teaching and it is a challenging task in the case of teaching oral skills as a speaker does not have not as much time for deciding which forms and words to use when speaking as there is when he or she is writing. Shastri (2010, 24-25) points out that we all make mistakes in our mother tongue so perhaps errors should be acceptable in a second language as well. There are many schools of thought concerning language teaching and error correction, but Shastri (ibid.) mentions a couple of the most famous ones: the behaviorist and cognitivist schools. In behaviorist thinking language learning happens mechanically and “hence, there is no room for errors”. The cognitivists see errors as part of natural language learning process.

Li (2010, 310-312) mentions that there are two types of error correction. Students can be given positive or negative feedback or “evidence” of their performance. Positive evidence means

informing the student of correct language use while giving negative evidence means pointing out errors made by the student. Li (ibid.) concludes that previous study shows that corrective feedback is important in L2 teaching, even if there are studies which argue that negative evidence is not beneficial for a learner's language acquisition process (see Schwartz 1993, for example). One reason why negative evidence can be justified is because of the different natures of L1 and L2 learning: L2 learning is a conscious process while learning L1 is an acquisition process. Because of the debate over the which kind of feedback is beneficial for the learners, the subjects of this study were asked about the different experiences, negative or positive, that have affected their feelings towards speaking English (see Appendix 1, question 23).

Teaching oral skills is essentially a matter of making choices whether to correct students and whether to focus on form or meaning. Both are important for successful communication. Hence, current literature on language teaching appears to focus on something that is called *communicative competence*.

### **2.3.2 Communicative Competence and Communicative Approach**

From the point of view of learning and teaching oral skills *communicative competence* is an essential concept. Kaburise (2011, 1) defines that *communicative competence* “is the knowledge of both the structural and functional elements of a language”. This means that a language learner should be able to use language in way that it is appropriate meaning- and form-wise. Structural elements refer to the grammar of the language and functional elements include the other aspects such as semantics (word choices), linguistic and physical gestures, idioms, intonation of speech and so on. The term was originally used by Dell Hymes in the mid-sixties (Rickheit, Strohner and Vorwerg 2008, 15). The *communicative approach* in language teaching evolved around the same time as the concept of *communicative competence* and thus they are tightly connected. The *communicative approach* is defined by Mitchell (1994, 33) as rather than being a fixed method it is “a broad assembly of ideas -- which have together come to be accepted as 'good practice' --”.

Talk of *communicative competence* raises a question: which is more important for successful communication, grammatical correctness or appropriate use of the functional elements of the language? The target of the communicative language teaching is to combine these two, but Kaburise (ibid.) states that Hymes launched the concept of *communicative competence* to emphasise that using grammatically correct language is not enough to be able to communicate in a language. The grammar books have responded to this; Kolln (1994, 12) argues that “the purpose of most grammar books and dictionaries is descriptive rather than prescriptive - - to describe how people actually use language, not how someone says it should be used.”

Spoken language does not follow the same rules as written language. There are words and structures that are acceptable and used in spoken language, but are often judged ungrammatical, according to Kolln (1994, 13), with *ain't* and *snuck* being two examples of these “ungrammatical” words. Kolln (ibid.) continues by stating that instead of asking “is it correct?” we should be asking “is it correct in this situation?” as the first question is somewhat incomplete. It should also be noted that grammar is not a finite set of rules: the grammar of English language has changed during several centuries, has been affected by many other languages and it evolves as it is used by its speakers. This is the point the *communicative approach* appears to be making.

Giving feedback on oral skills is a challenging task as in today's language teaching and what is actually most of the time evaluated is the speaker's *communicational competence*. Making error corrections and giving feedback was already discussed in the previous section, but what the elements are that should be evaluated were not stated. *CEFR* has its definition of what is included in the *communicative competence*, but Canale and Swain (1980, here as presented by Whyatt 2009, 366) define the elements included in the *communicational competence* as follows:

- a) *grammatical competence*: words and rules
- b) *sociolinguistic competence*: appropriateness
- c) *discourse competence*: cohesion and coherence
- d) *strategic competence*: appropriate use of communication strategies.

Not only can these elements be evaluated, but if the goal of language teaching is to train communicationally competent speakers these are the elements that should be taken into

consideration in language teaching (see *CEFR* 2003, 101-130, and see section 2.2 *CEFR* includes all of these elements in the learner's competence).

Grammar and the structural elements of the language can be taught with the help of grammar guides and books (there are grammar books explaining the grammar of spoken language. See Biber et al. 1999, for example). Also, discourse competence could be seen as something more mechanical that could be studied with the help of updated guidelines. Teaching of the other elements of the *communicational competence* is not necessarily as straightforward: “The teaching of spoken English in the EFL classroom requires students to learn English in their own cultural setting without using their target language in a real situation” (Talley and Hui-ling 2014, 39). The *sociolinguistic competence* as well as *strategic competence* could be considered to be part of the learner's pragmatic skills.

Mey (1994, 6) defines that “pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society”. *Sociolinguistic* and *strategic* competence are the dynamic elements of the language which are context-dependent and are defined by the users of the language. Cutting (2015, 85) brings up the debate in second language teaching which discusses whether pragmatic skills should be taught explicitly in L2 teaching. Cutting (ibid.) continues by explaining that those who argue this find that “exposing learners to pragmatic examples – and providing opportunities for incidental learning does not usually lead to acquisition”. According to the supporters of this view the learners can cope with the cultural knowledge they have acquired through their first language (see Ur 1996, for example). The other side of the debate argues that if L2 pragmatic skills are not taught, the learner may appear unwillingly rude and the skills need to be taught “if learners want to carry out effective negotiations with business partners from abroad, welcome overseas visitors without a hitch--” (Cutting 2015, 87).

Ke and Cahayni argue against teaching only the cultures of the inner circle varieties, as was mentioned in section 2.1.2, but instead of being against teaching pragmatic skills, they were calling for teaching of international cultures and communication. This kind approach to teaching

*communicative competence* is called *intercultural communicative competence* and the goal is not achieve native speaker proficiency (Cutting 2015, 86). Cutting (2015, 87-88) explains that at the moment the teaching of *intercultural communicative competence* can mean raising cultural awareness and using authentic English sources produced by non-native speakers as teaching material.

Cutting (2015, 87) states that teaching of *intercultural communicative competence* is more effective if the students receive guidance and explicit instruction from the teacher. Again, the role error correction should be considered: Cutting (ibid.) suggests that when it comes to the pragmatic skills, the students should be made aware of their errors. The reason she gives is that students do not often seem to realise their pragmatic errors. However, she continues by saying that giving feedback should be done cautiously “since pragmatics is so bound up with identity, ideology and community membership”.

Because language learning is not only a mechanical process, the way feedback is given is important to consider as harsh feedback might affect the learner's confidence which again might have an effect on the language learner's competence. Whyatt (2009, 369) states the correlation between confidence and competence is hardly straight-forward as either cannot replace the other: to communicate successfully both are needed. There are certain assumptions that are often related to competence and confidence:

- 1) lack of confidence means lack of competence
  - 2) self-confidence does not guarantee competence
  - 3) competence is a theoretical skill
  - 4) self-confidence is something more practical
- (adapted from Whyatt 2009, 369)

The role of confidence can be seen in the performance of the speaker. Rickheit, Strohner and Vorweg (2008, 17) suggest that according to Hymes competence and performance cannot be separated: “performance is the observable part, and competence is the inferred ability to produce the observed performance in the future”. Hymes' statement seems to agree with Whyatt's assumption

1). However, the validity of the assumption 1) can be questioned as lack of confidence may

interfere with competence. This does not only concern L2 speakers, but is the case with native speakers as well: a person who is nervous of speaking in public may produce weird sentence structures, false starts etc. even in their own mother tongue. The assumptions 2)-4) separate confidence and competence. When evaluating competence, the role of confidence and its effects on potential competence of the speaker should be remembered.

To conclude, the teaching of oral skills is seen today from a global perspective.

*Intercultural communicative competence* appears to answer to the many suggestions and critique concerning teaching of oral skills in L2: it includes the concept of *communicative competence* and setting *communicative competence* as the main goal for the learners means that all elements of the language are taught without giving specific emphasis on any of the four elements it consists of. It also manages to address the way the role of the inner variety speakers should be dealt with.

### **3. Materials and Method**

Materials of this study come from two main sources: empirical data and educational guidelines given by the Finnish government and the European Union. The method for conducting the study this thesis is a survey study. Qualitative and quantitative analysis have been made on the basis of the answers and the results can be found in section 5 and 6. Materials and method used are described in this section.

#### **3.1 Materials**

The core material of this study is empirical field data which has been collected in the form of a survey study. Appendix I presents the survey in its complete form. The survey forms were handed out to study subjects as paper versions as it was more convenient: all study subjects were present at same time in the same place and there was no guarantee that everyone would have a device with them which would have enabled them to do the questionnaire online. Other material of this study includes *the Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools* from 2003 and *CEFR*,

which have both been accessed via the Internet, as parts of each are presented in the final part of the survey the participants of this study completed.

### **3.2 Method**

The data collection is done in the form of a survey study and the survey forms a major part of the method used in this thesis. According to Fink (1, 2003) in the process of carrying out a good survey there are six important factors: specific measurable objects, sound research design, sound choice of population or sample, reliable and valid instruments, appropriate analysis and accurate reporting of results.

Even though this study is not measuring something that can be observed with eyes it does not mean that there are not any “specific measurable objects” to be measured. For example, the survey asks the students to rate what they believe are the most important factors when it comes to speaking in English using a scale. This way learner beliefs can be turned into “measurable objects”. To retrieve measurable results Osgood’s semantic differential scale is used in some of the survey’s closed questions: Zysberg (Zysberg ed. 2012, 8) writes that this scale is “aimed at the evaluative component of attitudes and opinions”.

Sound research design refers to the environment, which includes the physical place where the survey is done as well as the people in that physical environment. In the case of this survey the place is a classroom and two different groups have filled in the survey. Both of the groups have used the same classroom where they filled in the survey. The conditions in the classroom have also been similar as both groups attended a morning class and thus, the amount of natural light (etc.) has been equal to both groups.

The teaching groups consist of second year upper secondary school students and they make a sound sample: the students’ age varies a little depending on their date of birth etc., but all the participants are of the same age group. Slight variation in age is not likely to affect the results in a significant manner.



A reliable and valid instrument is the survey form which is “a self-administered form” (Fink 2003, 4). Designing a survey form is a delicate process: learner beliefs is the concept which is measured in the survey and to be able to measure it, the concept will have to be operationalized. Saris and Gallhofer (6, 2007) write that “operationalization is the translation of the concepts to the questions”. The questions which can be found in Appendix I aim at operationalizing the beliefs by using different scales and asking the participants take part in the operationalization process as they are asked open questions.

While conducting a survey study the appropriate analysis and accurate reporting are stages which will take place once the survey forms are collected from the participants. Fink (6, 2003) notes that there are “nominal, ordinal, or numerical” data which require analysis. Nominal data are, for example, the gender of the participant as it cannot be analysed in terms of numbers in the same way as ordinal data which “comes from the rating scales”. In this study the nominal data and numerical data will be combined in section 6: correlation analysis of the data has been conducted on the basis of the numerical data that was found in all of the survey data. Cohen et. al. (2003, 1) state that correlation analysis can be simple or complex, but the focus is on quantitative data and variables used to analyse the data. Cohen et. al. (ibid.) explains that in the correlation analysis a dependent variable’s relationship to independent variables is studied. In this study there are four variables and each of these variables take turns acting as dependent variables and independent variables in relation to one another. The correlation analysis done in this thesis is mostly forming simple relationships as the correlation analysis acts as supporting evidence for the qualitative analysis of the results.

The survey and its design process formed an important part of the execution of this study and thus, they will be dealt with in the following section. Notes were taken during both of the classes when the survey was conducted by the students and they will be introduced as well.

## 4. The Survey

This section consists of five parts: the first part covers the criticism faced by the *normative approach* because it is used in this study to some extent and it aims at justifying the method chosen for this study. After this the next two parts aim at giving an overall picture of the survey they introduce the participants of the study: the number of participants and some background information about the groups which took part in the study. The final part describes the two sessions during which the questionnaires were done by the students.

### 4.1 Criticism

The use of questionnaires is no longer a popular approach when it comes to conducting studies on beliefs: de Costa (2011, 348) mentions that using questionnaires to study learner beliefs has faced criticism and Barcelos (2003, 171) states that using questionnaires “makes it difficult to understand the process of an emic perspective and reinforces an abstract view of beliefs by disconnecting them from – students’ actions in real contexts and experiences”. Regardless of the criticism against questionnaires, it was chosen as the method to conduct this thesis for several practical reasons.

The school which agreed to cooperate with the study is not located in the researcher's home town and therefore setting up several meetings for interviews would have been time-consuming and costly. Also, for the teacher whose groups took part in the study, it was not a problem to arrange two one-off sessions, but asking for two more sessions to conduct interviews or to have students write long assignments might have proved more challenging to arrange. By having these one-off questionnaire sessions, a sound research environment was guaranteed: all study subjects were present at the same time and had the same conditions for filling in the questionnaire. The restricted access to students led to using a questionnaire and the use of a questionnaire allowed the sample to be good in size, but not too big to make the analysis too time-consuming. When the sample is big enough, it is reasonable to assume that some generalizations can be made on the basis of the collected data.

## 4.2 Designing the survey

Designing a survey was already covered in the method section, but as the use of questionnaires in beliefs study has faced criticism, I find that it is important to explain how the issues raised by the criticism have been taken into consideration while designing this study. This survey differs from the previously popular BALLI Survey which has been used to “asses beliefs of students learning foreign languages” (Nikitina and Furuoka 2006, 210) (for the BALLI survey questions and answer sheet see Appendix 2). BALLI Survey relies on the Likert scale whereas this study does so only partly. Barcelos and other critical voices' concern seems to focus on the use of the Likert scale which does not allow very elaborate answers by the participants. Nilsen (2014, 51) finds that “many of our beliefs fall somewhere between the two extremes of “definitely false“ and “definitely true” and claims that we could evaluate our beliefs by using number from 0 to 1 to indicate who how true of false we find something, for example. Nilsen's statement supports the use of the Likert scale, but I agree with Barcelos (2003, 171-180) that the mere use of the Likert scale might result in answers that do not reveal the actual reality behind the participant's answer. Barcelos (ibid.) is concerned that the results gained by using questionnaires do not reflect the student's everyday reality.

So that this study would be able to grasp the reality of its subjects, the majority of the questions in this study are open questions. The open questions refer to the open-ended questions which do not have given options to choose from. Some of the questions are closed questions, but the part which focuses on the students' beliefs consists mostly of open-ended questions. Also, in many of the closed questions, where the answer options are already given, the student was able to choose the option 'other' and then explain in their own words what reflected their feelings best.

It is perhaps easier to give a reflective description of one's feelings by using one's native language, but the reason why this study chose to present all questions in English was to ensure that things would not “get lost in translation” and that students own voice could be heard through the answers. This way the survey creates an emic level and the study subjects' own language is used as

the main source of information instead of translating which always requires interpreting someone's words. Of course, for some students answering in English might have been more uncomfortable than answering in Finnish and they might have felt that they were not fully able to express their feelings. The students were advised to answer in Finnish if they felt that they were unable to express themselves in English.

Using a survey allows the students to consider what they want to say and they do not have to form their answers instantly unlike in an interview situation. As Barcelos (2003, 15) states, the use of a questionnaire is “less threatening than observation”. Observations are also based on the researcher's subjective findings which can make the interpretation of the research data complicated. As the language for this study was English, an interview situation might have proved too challenging for some students. The students were encouraged to use aides, such as dictionaries, if they felt they needed them.

To understand the context experienced daily by the students, the first three parts of the study focus on asking questions about their background and what is their relationship to English language in and outside school. This kind of data provides important information and also helps to form an idea about the context which surrounds the students and might affect their learning as well as development as user of a language.

The order of the questions is carefully considered: the background information questions function as warm-up questions so that the participant is able to get used to replying in English. The questions about the Finnish curriculum and *CEFR* are left last as they are not the main focus point of this study, but may provide important information about the relationship between the students' beliefs, the goals set for them on a national level and their awareness of these goals. Nikitina and Furuoka (2006, 211) mention that BALLI Surveys have been criticised for not indicating the themes the questions are divided into. In this survey the five different parts have been marked clearly so that the participants would understand the purpose of the particular section.

de Costa (2011, 348) mentions that the *normative approach*, which favours

questionnaires, views beliefs “as preconceived notions, myths or misconceptions”. That is not the case in this study as the study assumes that beliefs can be flexible and ever-changing as was already declared in the section 2.1. There is a question asking students to explain which experiences have affected their attitude towards speaking in English: there might have been a one big moment or several smaller events which have affected their view of themselves as speakers of English. These experiences might have changed their beliefs in one way or another. By asking about these kinds of experiences, beliefs are not considered to be fixed assumptions about one's skills.

To make sure the questionnaire, the questions and the question types were easy enough to understand, there was a test student for the questionnaire. The user in question was a first year student in an upper secondary school, other than the school in which this study was conducted. This student filled in the questionnaire online, but she was advised to ask clarifying questions if she felt unsure about anything concerning the questionnaire. This student gave comments about the study and asked questions if she was not completely sure how to answer certain questions. The instructions of those questions were changed on the basis of the comments. The answers were also reviewed to see if they responded to the questions in the ways expected.

### **4.3 Describing the survey**

The survey presents 27 questions of which 11 questions are closed questions and 16 open questions. The questions have been divided into five different sections. The sections 1 and 2 cover the participants' background and their use of English in school. The third section asks where and how English is used outside the classroom. Section 4 focuses on the main question of this study: the questions aim at finding out answers which reveal the participants' beliefs about their oral skills. The final section of the survey describes the goals in the *Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools* and the participants are asked to share their thoughts on them.

#### **4.4 Participants**

The students under investigation are second year upper secondary school students. The students are 17-19 years old. These students are already fairly far in their language studies and have an extensive experience of the Finnish education system. The survey has been carried out in an upper secondary school in Hämeenlinna. Two different groups have taken part in answering the survey. 48 students have completed the survey form. 49<sup>th</sup> survey form was done by a Canadian exchange student whose native language is English. Answers given by the student have been omitted from the general results. The student has given her permission to analyse her answers and while answering the student took the perspective of an outsider observing Finnish culture, Finnish people and their use of English. This students answers will be analysed in a qualitative way later on.

The participants are all in inclusive education groups meaning that they have not been signed into different groups according to their English grade or any other variable. The students who have participated are taking part in an English course which is obligatory to all upper secondary school students who are studying English as their first foreign language in Finland.

#### **4.5 Execution of the Survey**

The classes took place in the morning between 8 am – 9.15 am and 9.30 am –10.45 am on 19 July 2015. I was the only adult and an authoritative figure present in the classroom as the teacher of the groups was absent on the day. Before filling in the survey I gave the students a 10 minute instruction speech on how to fill in the survey. The students were asked to use only English in their answers and they were reminded that they are not tested and thus, grammatical errors are perfectly acceptable. They were told that the use of Finnish was possible if needed. The different question types were introduced to make it clear how the students were expected to mark their answers. Additional instructions to questions 15 and 19 were written on a board as there seemed to be insufficient amount of instruction in the survey. The students were also reminded of the possibility to ask for help at any point if they had trouble understanding a question or how to answer it. The

instruction page of the survey (Appendix 1) read out loud and shown to students. The students were assured that all the answers would be handled anonymously.

The students were not set any time limit to complete the survey form. However, 45 minutes of the class was left when the students were handed the survey forms. Most students of the first group needed approximately 25 minutes to complete the form. Only one student used the 45 minutes left of the class. In the second group the first surveys were handed back after 15 minutes and rest of the forms five minutes later.

Students were given the option to use a dictionary to help answering the questions. In the first group no one was seen using one, but in the second group at least two students were seen using a dictionary. The students were advised to ask for my help if they felt like they needed it or wished to clarify something. In the first group one student asked help to translate one of the questions and the question was translated into Finnish for the student. Another student in the first group asked how to translate a word from Finnish to English, but was advised to go around that specific word and to use a familiar word in English instead.

## **5. Results**

This section represents the results of the survey study. The focus of the section is on the quantitative data produced by the survey and the more qualitative analysis of the results will be done later in section 6. The numeral data will be accompanied by some examples of the answers given by the participants. This is done because some of the qualitative data has been turned into quantitative data and the examples illustrate the way this has happened.

The survey has 27 questions in total, but some of the questions seemed to have caused confusion amongst the participants (the questions were not answered as instructed) and this is why some of them are left out from the analysis of the data. The questions which are left out and which ones are used will be stated in the sections in which those questions are included. Each filled in survey has been given a number, but they have not been numbered in the order they were handed in. This was done to protect the students' anonymity. The numbering has been done to name the

students as their answers are analysed. The students are named Student 1, Student 2 etc. according to the number on their survey sheet.

### 5.1. Part 1: General information about the participants

The first section aims at collecting some background information about the participants. Out of the 48 participants 23 are female and 24 male. One participant did not wish to state their gender. As previously stated, the students were all 17 –19 -year-olds and the following table shows the age distribution of the participants:

Figure 1. *Age of the participant*

17 years	18 years	19 years
25	21	2

47 participants reported their nationality to be Finnish and one participant is a Turkish native. 44 participants mentioned that their first and only language is Finnish. Three multilinguals reported that the other languages that are spoken at their home are Estonian, Turkish and Swedish. One participant mentioned that English is often spoken at home because a family member runs an international company.

### 5.2 Part 2: Use of English in school

School is an important context for the participants when it comes to learning English. All the participants have studied English 8 –13 years. *Figure 2* shows how long the students have studied English:

Figure 2. *The number of years the participants have studied English*

8 years	9 years	10 years	11 years	12 years	13 years
11	24	3	8	1	1

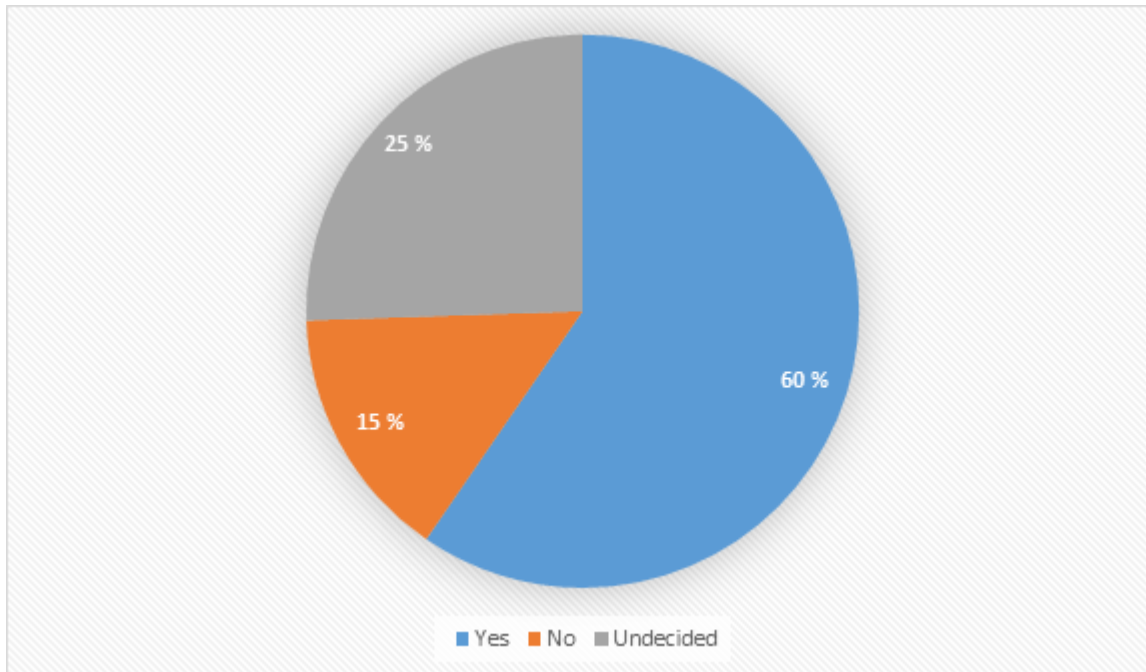
The participants were asked whether they had taken the English course 8, which is a course focusing specifically on oral skills, but none of the participants has taken the course.

Question 8 asks the students if they like English as a school subject and majority of the students



admits that they enjoy studying English (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. *Answers of question 8: Do you enjoy English as a school subject?*



The participants who have replied “Yes”, “It’s okay”, “It’s fine”, or have indicated a positive answer in another way, have been included in the Yes-category. No-category was formed by those who simply answered that they do not enjoy English as a school subject. The ones who have answered “Sometimes” or something similar are in the Undecided-category. The specific percentages are:

- Yes: 60.42 %
- No: 14.58 %
- Undecided: 25.00 %

The students’ academic success is measured with a scale of 4 –10 in Finland and 10 is the highest grade. Most of the participants’ latest grade in English has been the grade 7, which equals “satisfactory” skills. None of the students had received the highest possible grade, but no one had failed their previous English course either (the lowest grade 4 means that the student has not passed an exam, a course or a subject). (Explanations for the grades can be found from:

<http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/1998/19980852#Pidm1951344>)

Figure 4. *The participants' grades*

<b>Grade:</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>
	0	6	8	16	8	10	0

### 5.3 Part 3: Use of English outside school

This section was included in the survey to find out if the students use English outside the school context. The participants have been asked if they have used English outside the Finnish borders: three students have experienced living outside Finland. The countries they have lived in include the United States of America (hereafter USA) and the United Kingdom (hereafter the UK). 22 participants have travelled abroad and used English as the language of communication. The variety of countries the participants have travelled to includes USA, the UK, Canada, Portugal, Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, Greece, Spain, Latvia, Poland, Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, France, South Korea, Nepal Egypt and Thailand. The duration of the trip has been excluded from the result analysis as some of the participants have answered the question even though they reported the trip to have lasted only a week when they were asked to reply only if they had spent two weeks or more abroad. There were two main goals for the question and those goals have been reached; first one was to find out if the students had used English on their travels and the other was to see in which countries they had used English and how mobile they have been. In addition to those 22 who have answered “yes” to the question 11, 11 participants have replied that they use English abroad in question 12, even though they have replied “no” to the question 11. This seems to indicate that they have used English, but they have read the instructions of the question carefully and their trips have been shorter than two weeks. Thus, the total number of participants who have used English abroad rises to 32.

In the question 12 the participants have listed where they mostly use English and they have been given the option to mark one or more out of the six options. The sixth option is to add an option that has not been listed. The options “at home” and “on the Internet” are the most popular answers since 38 students have ticked the option “at home” and 42 participants the “on the Internet” option. The two options clearly stand out from the other options and the majority mentions that the

Internet as the primary place where they use English. This is determined by the fact that this option has been marked number one place by 24 participants when they have been asked to mark the place where they use English most often. Number one means the most frequent place, number two the second-most frequent and so forth. If a student had marked down only one option in the question 2, this reply was analysed as a number one for that option. All of the listed options were chosen by more than one students and three participants had included their own option as they were not listed in the given options. The participants' own options reveal that the participants use English at work, with friends and when talking to American friends.

Figure 5. *Answers the question 12: Where do you mostly use English?*

<b>In school</b>	<b>At home</b>	<b>At hobbies</b>	<b>When abroad</b>	<b>On the Internet</b>	<b>Somewhere else</b>
38	8	7	27	42	3

All the participants use English in school, but outside school the participants seem to be frequent users of English as well (see Appendix 1, part 3, question 13). 35 participants use English more than once a week, 5 participants once a week, 4 participants more than once a month and 4 participants less than once a month. None of the participants has chosen the option "once a month".

The last question of this section asked the participants to state in which way they mostly use English. Five participants' answers deviate from the instruction because they have used 1 (=the most frequent way), 2 or 3 more than once. Assumably, this has been done to indicate that the two options are equally frequently used. Their numbering has been analysed as they have marked the numbers. The question has been analysed in a similar way as the question 12: the most popular option has been determined by how many students marked the option their number one option and which option has earned second-most number ones and so forth. The following table shows how the participants have ranked the options and the numbers in the columns show how many students have marked the option as number one way in which they use English:

Figure 6. *The answers to the question 14*

<b>Do you mostly...</b>	<b>hear</b>	<b>speak</b>	<b>read</b>	<b>write in</b>	<b>English?</b>
	24	5	15	5	

The participants seem to mostly hear English and read in English. Speaking and writing English are the least popular ways of using English. The question 14 is interesting from the point of view of this study because it seems that the participants use their oral skills much less than they hear English.

The following section explains some of the reasons why hearing English appears to be the most frequent way the participants use English.

#### **5.4 Part 4: English oral skills and beliefs**

The fourth section of the survey focuses on the issues most essential to this study. Some of the data revealed by the answers of this section provides answers to the study questions stated in the introduction. The numeral data is presented here, but some of the answers will be analysed more carefully later.

The answers to the question 15 reveal that the options “fun”, “easy”, “enjoyable” and “makes me nervous but I'm fine once I get started” describe the best how the participants feel about speaking in English. The following table shows how the different options have been favoured:

Figure 7. *How the participants feel about speaking English*

<b>Do you feel that speaking English is...</b>	<b>fun</b>	<b>easy</b>	<b>enjoyable</b>	<b>makes me nervous but I'm fine once I get started</b>	<b>makes me nervous and uncomfortable</b>	<b>difficult</b>	<b>scary</b>	<b>something else, what?</b>
	30	27	24	25	3	7	2	2

The two participants who answered “something else, what” added that they felt speaking English is a “challenge” (Student 12) and “spooky” (Student 30). The participants are almost unanimous in their answers to the question 16 as they agree that speaking English is an important skill. Only one participant disagreed.

The question 17 seems to have been somewhat problematic for the participants: some of the participants have not used numbering as asked, but instead they have marked “x” next to the options they have chosen. Those replies have been deleted from the analysis as it is not possible to determine which option the participant has considered the most important. Seven participants have used this kind of marking. Those participants who have numbered more than three options have been taken into account, but only the first three options they have numbered have been included in the analysis. One participant has not given any answer to this question. The question is interesting because it reveals whether the participants are more concerned about form- or meaning related issues. One of the points of this section is to find out whether the students are more meaning-focused or form-focused learners and how they feel about speaking English. It was explained in the section 2.1.2 that Brown found out that the students in their study preferred explicit language teaching in comparison to the more communicational approach. The answers to this question show that when it comes to the spoken skills, the participants are not as concerned about grammar as they are about successful communication.

The question 17 has been analysed in the similar way as the questions 12 and 14. First, the ratings of the options have been ignored and the number of times the option has been included

in the participants' top three choices has been counted. For example, the option "to have a wide vocabulary" has been chosen 27 times in total (i.e. it has been given 1, 2 or 3). After this has been done, the order of the options has been determined in the following way: the option that has been marked as number one ("the most important") most frequently is considered to be the most highly valued option. The third and second place have been determined by using the same procedure. The top three aspects of spoken skills the participants consider the most important are:

1. Being able to communicate efficiently
2. To have wide vocabulary
3. To speak fluently and
3. Knowing how to pronounce English

The third place is shared by the two options presented above because they have both been chosen 19 times and they have been numbered as the most important and second-most important skills by the same number of participants.

The answers of the question 18 reflect those of the question 17. Figure 8 shows the how the participants describe themselves as speakers of English. Again the participants have been allowed to choose as many options they have wished to describe themselves:

Figure 8. *How the participants described themselves as speakers of English*

<b>fluent</b>	<b>gram- matical</b>	<b>good com- muni- cator</b>	<b>brave</b>	<b>shy</b>	<b>insecure</b>	<b>scared</b>	<b>something else, what?</b>
22	11	35	17	12	9	4	0

The participants value the importance of communication and they also describe themselves as good communicators. The other popular choices include "fluent" and "brave". None of the participants has given an alternative answer that has not been listed already.

The question 19 has not been included in the analysis because the answers show that the question is poorly instructed as over ten participants have not answered the question as instructed. The participants have not rated all of the options, but they have only rated some of them

or they have used “x” to indicate their answer. Some participants have not answered the question at all. The question reveals interesting information about the participants, but as the other questions provide similar information about the participants, omitting the question from the analysis is not too great a loss.

The question 20 is an open question, but it is possible to divide the answers into categories as certain explanations for how the participants have gained their oral skills strengths appear several times. Some participants have mentioned more than one explanation. Figure 9 shows the categories and how often an explanation falling into that category has been mentioned:

Figure 9. *The participants and how they have gained their oral skills strengths*

By consuming English culture (using the language online, reading, watching movies and TV shows, playing games etc.)	19
Using the language outside school	14
Studying/Practicing the language	19
Has an interest in the language	3
Unsure	1
Something else.	1

The consumption of English culture is mentioned most often. The participants explain that they sometimes watch TV series and movies without Finnish subtitles and this has helped them to become more proficient in English. This probably also explains why the participants have stated that they mostly *hear* English. Some also brought up the online games which they have played in English. Using the language outside school is considered to be separate from the first category because the participants explain that they use English with friends who are not native speakers of Finnish. The importance of studying the language has been mentioned several times. Most participants have some kind of an idea about how they have developed their spoken skills in English and there is only one participant who is unsure.

Most participants mention very specific areas of spoken skills that they would like to improve on when they answered question 21. The majority consider themselves already as “good communicators”, according to the answers of the question 18 and there are only a couple of

participants who feel that communication is something that they should work on. Other aspects the participants are concerned about are their vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency.

Figure 10. *The participants and what they would like to improve about their oral skills*

Pronunciation	10
Vocabulary	16
Fluency	11
Grammar	3
Communication	2
Confidence	3
Everything in general	3
Does not know	2
Nothing	5
No comment	4

Even though most participants mention that there is something that they would like to improve about their oral skills, the majority says that they are happy with their oral skills. In the question 22 34 participants state that they are content with their oral skills and only seven participants state that they are not happy with them. One participant chose not to answer this question. Nine participants' answers suggest that they are somewhat happy, but they also mentioned that there are some things they would like to improve on before they are able to say that they are happy with their oral skills. Here are some examples:

Student 32: *"I'm quite happy that I can communicate by using English and communicating is pretty simple. Although I do make a lot of mistakes in grammar."*

Student 38: *"I'm semi-happy but would like to be more fluent"*

Student 39: *"I could be more fluent, so I'm not completely happy with my skills."*

In the final question of part 4 the participants describe the experiences which have effected their feelings towards speaking in English. More than half of the participants have reported they have positive experiences, such using the language and noticing that another person has understood what they have said. Negative experiences include cases where the participant has been criticised by their teacher and as a result has felt uncomfortable using English afterwards. Eight per cent of the participants described both kinds of experiences. Some experiences do not fall into the



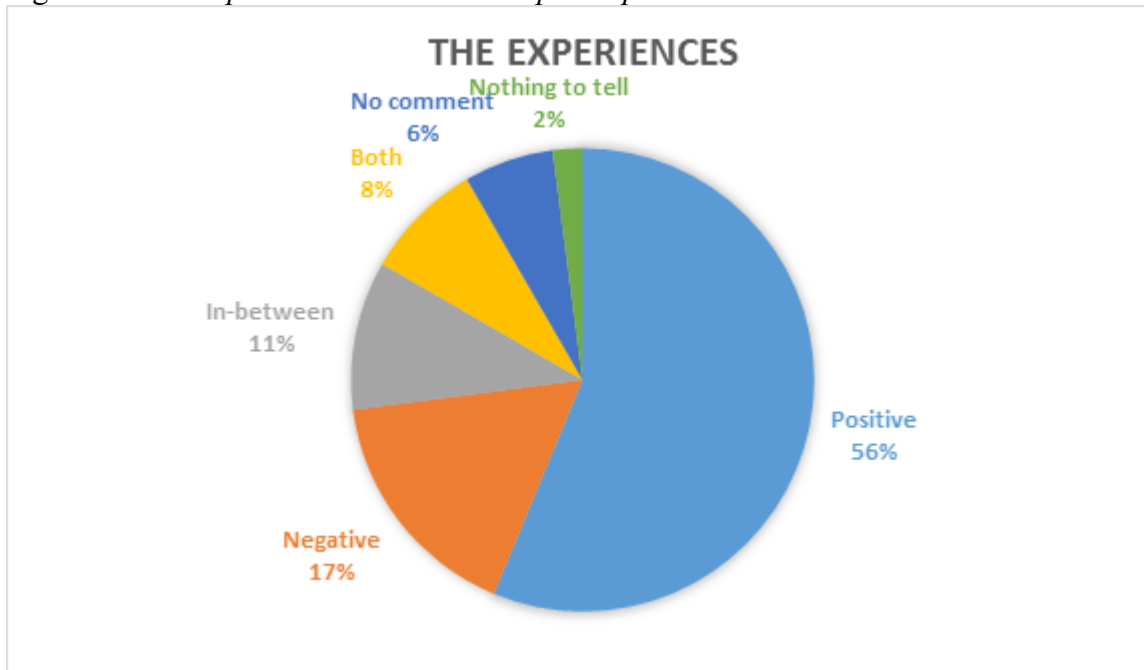
“positive” or “negative” category and thus, they have been labeled as experiences that are something “in-between”. Two examples will show what is meant by these “in-between” experiences:

Student 33: *“I don't like to speak English at school. It's sometimes very awkward. I like to learn new words and phrases and then use them in real life.”*

Student 38: *“People often thank me for my large vocabulary, but are sometimes terrorized by my pronunciation”* (the participant mentions suffering from stuttering sometimes)

Only six per cent of the participants have chosen not to comment the question at all and there is one participant (two per cent out of all the participants) who mentions that there are no experiences to describe.

Figure 11. *The experiences described the participants*



### 5.5 Part 5: The Finnish National Curriculum and its goals

The participants have been asked to analyse the goals of the national curriculum as it forms an important part of their learning context even if its effects are not necessarily visible for the students or they may not be aware how the national curriculum affects the teaching they are exposed to (see Appendix 1, part 5 to see the information the students have been asked to analyse).

The answers for the questions 24 and 25 can be divided into different categories. In the question 24 the participants assessed the goals presented to them; 39 participants agree that the goals seem good. The reasons the participants have given include comments about how students of their age and at their level of studying English should be able to achieve the goals of the national curriculum and *CEFR*. Three participants disagree with the majority's view; Student 42 states: “*that [the goals] sound hard to me*”. Two students have not commented on the question at all. Four answers have been defined as “undecided” or “doubtful”. Some examples of those replies include:

Student 17: “*I don't know are these goals good, but I hope that the Finnish National Board of Education know what it is best goals.*”

Student 38: “*To achieve those the courses in lukio (= upper secondary school) need to have oral based tests and more oral extracts.*”

In the question 25 the participants have been given a chance to state if there is anything that they would change about the goals. 38 participants have not given any suggestions and hence, their replies have been interpreted so that they would not change anything. Again, there are five participants who have not answered the question at all. Four participants would like to change the goals in one way or another:

Student 9: “*Maybe the last one is hardest because telling from your own view might be hard*” (the goal the participant refers to states that the student should be able to explain their opinions and is able to analyse an issue from various viewpoints. See Appendix 1, part 5)

Student 12: “*The focus from perfect grammar to brave speaking!*”

Student 34: “*I think it would be more important to learn to speak English in reality life instead of perfect vocabulary or very hard words, we won't need them in future!!!*”

The participants have been asked to give further comments concerning the national curriculum and *CEFR* goals if they have any. Five participants have stated further comments, three commented on the survey in general and the rest have either not commented at all or they have stated that they do not have any further comments. The answers of the five students who have commented on the question include comments about how cultural matters and the different varieties of English should be taken into consideration in teaching:

Student 4: “*Teacher should teach more American English, not just Brit English.*”

Student 6: “*Students should watch more TV shows and movies.*”

Student 17: *“I think that school would be a little longer because then it will be more time to learn.”*

Student 20: *“Maybe less grammar and more talking and communication because Finnish people know the grammatic rules but they are shy and afraid to speak with foreign people.”*

Student 28: *“Finns aren't very talkative so some of the goals may be hard to reach.”*

At the end of the survey the participants have been given an opportunity to comment on the whole survey. This has been done to find out whether the participants have been motivated to answer the questions and to see what their attitude towards the survey has been: if the majority of the participants gives negative feedback and states that they have not given their answers any thought, it might show in their answers. Thus, their attitude towards the survey would affect the results of this study. The majority of the participants has had a positive attitude towards the survey. This has been concluded on the basis of their comments such as:

Student 13: *“Good questions and it was nice to answer.”*

Student 23: *“I like surveys.”*

Student 41: *“Good survey. I really had to think about my English skills and now I know better what I should improve and on which things I have to pay attention.”*

Student 44: *“Fun survey.”*

Some participants have been happy about having a different class from their normal lesson.

Altogether, the survey has been given 32 positive comments. None of the participants has stated any negative comments, but one participant seems somewhat undecided about her feelings towards the survey:

Student 17: *“Nice but some questions were too difficult”*

Other participants have not given any comments concerning the survey. Because the participants' attitude towards the survey appears to be mostly positive, it is reasonable to assume that they have replied honestly and that they have given at least some thought for their answers. This cannot be fully proven, of course, but this is the starting point for the qualitative analysis of this study.

## **6. Analysis**

As has been stated previously, one of the points of this study and the reason behind the choice to use a survey as a research method is the goal of being able to make generalisations, or rather logical conclusions, on the basis of the collected data. Barcelos (2003, 15) claims that “questionnaires make it difficult to guarantee consistent interpretation by individuals”. This task might be tricky, but this study has taken an attempt to do so.

The following sections introduce some correlations found in the data and they present some qualitative data at the same time. Only fraction of the collected data will be used because the amount of analyzable data is vast for the purposes of this study. Some of the data presented in section 5 that is not used in this section will be brought up in the discussion section later on.

The sections are divided according to four different variables which have been used to find some correlations in the data. The variables will be introduced in the order they have been analysed. The variables will be compared with each other to see how they correlate. The correlation analysis is based on the speaker categories the participants have been divided into according to their beliefs about themselves as speakers of English. The participants have been divided into the speaker categories by using quantitative and qualitative means.

### **6.1 Speaker categories**

The participants have been divided into three speaker categories according to how they have responded to the questions 15, 18 and 22. These questions have been chosen as determiners because they form a mix of closed and open-ended questions. The answers to the closed questions are fairly straightforward to analyse and the open-ended questions allow the participants' own voice to be heard. The questions clearly focus on the participant's perception of themselves as speakers of English. These questions have been understood by the participants as they have answered them according to the instructions and thus, they are eligible for this kind of analysis. The speaker categories represent the image and beliefs the participants have about themselves as speakers of

English. The three categories are: ‘positive’, ‘negative’ and ‘undecided’.

The participants answers have been analysed in the following manner: the participant has been analysed as ‘positive’ if they fit into the following conditions:

1. In the question 15 the participant has chosen one, two or all of the following options: *fun*, *easy*, *enjoyable* and *makes me nervous, but I'm fine once I get started* (this last option has been considered as a positive statement on the condition that the two following conditions have been fulfilled as well).
2. In the question 18 the participant has chosen one or more of the following options: *fluent*, *grammatical*, *good communicator* and *brave*.
3. In the question 22 the participant has stated that they are happy with their oral skills. Answers in which the participant states that they are happy, but they would like to improve on some things are still considered, are still considered as positive answers.

The participants who have been included in the 'negative' group have answered the questions in the following way:

1. In the question 15 the participant has chosen one, two or all of the following options: *makes me nervous and uncomfortable*, *difficult* and *scary*. The option '*makes me nervous, but I'm fine once I get started*' has been considered as a negative statement on the condition that the two following conditions have been fulfilled.
2. In the question 18 the participant has chosen one or more of the following options: *shy*, *insecure*, *scared*.
3. In the question 22 the participant has stated that they are not happy with their oral skills.

The participants whose replies do not meet the conditions set for the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ categories have been determined as ‘undecided’. The participants’ answers indicate that they are uncertain about the way they perceive themselves as speakers of English. Their answers are a mix between the answers of the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ category. Student 4 is an example of an 'undecided' participant and the reasons for this are:

1. In the question 15 Student 4 has chosen the options: *fun* and *makes me nervous, but I'm fine once I get started*.
2. In the question 18 Student 4 has chosen the options: *fluent*, *good communicator* and *shy*.
3. In the question 22 Student 4 states: “*Sometimes I think I'm good at them but in school my schoolmates are better.*”

Figure 12 shows how many participants have been included in each category:

Figure 12. *The participants and the speaker categories*

Category:	Positive	Negative	Undecided
The number of participants:	25	5	18

The majority of the participants have been defined as 'positive' speakers. There are only five clearly 'negative' speakers. Even though 50 per cent of the participants have a 'positive' image of themselves, 40 per cent are 'undecided' as their answers indicate that they are not entirely happy with their skills, but they are not fully condemning their skills either. Now that the participants have been divided into the speaker categories, the categories will be compared with the four chosen variables to see how they correlate with each other.

## 6.2 Variables

Saris and Gallhofer (2, 2007) mention that after the topic of the study is clear the second phase is to define which variables will be taken into consideration when analysing the research data. As stated earlier, the age of the participant is not likely to be a defining factor as all the participants of this study are close in age. Instead, as the groups are mixed gender groups, the gender of the participant might be a variable which could affect the results. The variables which have been chosen for the correlation analysis are:

- 1) gender (the question 2)
- 2) their current English grade (the survey question 9),
- 3) whether they enjoy English as a school subject (meant to measure their motivation, the survey question 8) and
- 4) how much they have used or use English outside school (the survey question 13)

These variables have likely affected the answers and the positive and negative beliefs the participants have about their oral skills. These variables represent the questions asked in the first three parts of the survey. Some of the possible variables have been left out. For example, the majority of the participants has studied English the same number of years (the survey question 6) and thus, it is not likely this is a differentiating variable between the participants. There are several questions concerning the use of English outside school, but only the answers to the question 13 have been used because in the question 13 the participants clearly state how frequently they use English outside the school context.

### 6.2.1 Gender

The first variable, gender, has revealed some differences between those who have informed their gender to be male or female. As only one participant has chosen not to tell their gender and no one has mentioned that they represent any other gender than female or male, it is not possible to make conclusions about the representatives of any other gender than female or male. The comparisons between the three speaker categories and genders show that the males dominate the ‘positive’ speakers’ category, while the ‘negative’ and ‘undecided’ categories are dominated by the females. Figure 13 demonstrates the situation:

Figure 13. *Speaker categories and genders*

	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b><u>Total</u></b>
<b>Female</b>	8	4	11	23
<b>Male</b>	17	0	7	24
<b>Other</b>	0	0	1	1
<b><u>Total</u></b>	25	4	19	48

On the basis of this data comparison, it appears that the men of this study are more satisfied with their English oral skills than the women. The difference between the genders is clear as more than half of the ‘positive’ speakers are male. None of the participants have stated that they believe that their feelings towards their skills might be somehow related to their gender. As this is the case it, it is possible to assume that the differences in the beliefs of men and women are not caused by factors of which the participants themselves are consciously aware. The participants have not been specifically asked if they believe that there are significant differences in the ways men and women see themselves as speakers of English. The participants may have preconceptions and beliefs concerning the differences between men and women, and it would be interesting to investigate this matter further.

This revelation raises a question: why is there such a gap between the two genders? Academic success could offer a potential explanation; perhaps the men of this study have better school grades than the females. The participants’ school grades can be seen as indicators which reveal whether English is a strong or a challenging school subject for the participants. Perhaps, *men*

*are better at English than women.* On the basis of the school grades, this does not seem to be the case. This will be proved soon, but first the correlations between the speaker categories and school success will be presented in a similar manner as the relationship between gender and the categories.

### 6.2.2 Grade

The participants have been divided into three groups on the basis of their school success. The first group is called the ‘the participants with a high grade’, because the participants’ grades are higher than the average grade of all the participants. The average grade for all the participants is 7 (for the explanations of the different grades see section 5.2). The second group is called ‘the participants with an average grade’ which represents the majority of the participants and those whose current English grade is 7 or 6. The line has been drawn here because grade 6 is still close to the whole groups’ average grade. The third group represents ‘the participants with a low grade’ who have most recently received either grade 5 or 4 in English. The grade 4 equals “failed” and 5 is given for showing “passable” skills (<http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/1998/19980852#Lidp3670880>).

Figure 14. *The participants' grades and speaker categories*

	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b><u>Total</u></b>
<b>High grade (10-8)</b>	13	0	5	18
<b>Average grade (7-6)</b>	12	2	9	23
<b>Low grade (5-4)</b>	0	3	4	7
<b><u>Total</u></b>	25	5	18	48

The ‘participants with a high grade’ and the ‘participants with an average grade’ are equally presented in the ‘positive’ speaker category. Hence, it can be concluded that the participant’s grade does not have to be above the average grade for the participant to have a positive image of themselves as a speaker of English. Student 2 is an example of a participant who has an average grade, but who is still happy with his skills because he “- - *can communicate well with speaking English*” (answer to the question 22).



The ‘participants with an average grade’ may be uncertain of their skills (‘undecided’), but only two participants from this group are in the ‘negative’ speaker category. The ‘participants with a low grade’, again, are not very confident about their skills as they are all in the ‘negative’ or ‘undecided’ category. Student 18 is a participant who has ‘negative’ beliefs about herself and whose grade is also low. The two following quotes explain why she is *shy* when it comes to speaking English:

Student 18: *“I don’t know much words and that why it is difficult for me”*  
 (answer to the question 15)  
*“I want speak but I don’t know every words and then comes silens [sic] moment and I don’t like those.”*  
 (answer to the question 23)

The figures of this section show that the grades and what kind of beliefs the participants have about their oral skills correlate to some extent. The participants who have a good or an average grade are mostly happy with their oral skills. The participants who have a lower grade do not have very positive beliefs about their skills

It was promised in the previous section that the relationship between the participants’ gender, speaker category and grade would be explained. The reason why it is possible to deny the claim that *men are better at English than women* is proved by the fact 50 per cent (eight participants out of 18 participants) of the ‘participants with a high grade’ are women. Out of the women who are ‘participants with a high grade’ only three are in the ‘undecided’ speaker category while all the others are in the ‘positive’ category. The men in this group follow the same pattern: two out of nine male participants are in the ‘undecided’ category. Thus, the figures show that men and women are equally good at English on the basis of their school success and that at least those women who have a good grade are also happy with their oral skills.

Something that is detectable is the difference between the men and women in the group ‘participants with an average grade’; 37.5 per cent of the women (three out of eight women) in this group are in the ‘positive’ speaker category. The numbers for men are higher as 60 per cent of the men (nine out of 15 men) in this group are part of the ‘positive’ speaker category. It appears

that the women have more critical beliefs about their oral skills than the men if they have an average grade. This way the participants' school success explains the differences between the men and women's beliefs to some extent.

### **6.2.3 The participants and English as a school subject**

Even though the participants' grades are used as one of the variables they do not necessarily reveal how the participants' feel about English as a school subject. The previous section already showed that the participant might have an average grade, but they still have positive beliefs about their oral skills. The participant's grade is also a problematic variable for another reason: a student's grade might not always correlate with their skills because a student might be very proficient, but is not motivated to show that in school for one reason or another (for example, the class is too early in the morning for them and they are tired, the subjects covered in class are not of special interest to them and so forth). The grades also depend on what the teacher decides to emphasize when grading: often grades are based on written testimonies of the student's skills. A student might be a keen and proficient speaker of English, but that is not fully reflected in their English grade if their written skills are not equally satisfactory.

For these reasons it has been important to find out whether the participants enjoy studying English or not and if there is a correlation between their school success and how they feel about English as a school subject. Grades are given by teachers, or in other words the school, but when the participants are asked if they enjoy English in school, the tables are turned and the participants rate English as a school subject.

Figure 3 in section 5.2 shows how the participants' answers to the question 8 have been analysed and the next figure follows the same pattern of analysis: the participants have clearly stated that they either enjoy English or that they do not or that they are not sure how they feel. Figure 15 is similar to the previous variable charts and shows how the speakers of each category feel about English as a school subject:

Figure 15. *The speaker categories and English as a school subject*

	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b><u>Total</u></b>
<b>Yes</b>	20	0	9	29
<b>No</b>	1	3	1	5
<b>Undecided</b>	4	2	8	14
<b><u>Total</u></b>	25	5	18	48

It was revealed in the section 5.2 that the majority of the participants enjoy English as a school subject, but the speaker categories here reveal that those who have positive beliefs about their skills also enjoy English as a school subject. The participants who are part of the ‘negative’ group do not enjoy English, but those who are ‘undecided’ about what they believe about their skills are either enjoying English or they are not too sure how they feel about it as a school subject. Student 34 is an example of a participant who enjoys English even though she describes herself “shy”, “nervous” and “scared”, but also mentions that she is a “grammatical” and “fluent” speaker in the question 18. Student 34 explains the reasons why she enjoys English as a school subject in the following way:

Student 34: *“Nowadays, yes. It is kind of hard and takes a lot to try to be as good as the others but I think its funny and and useful.”*

Out of the ‘positive’ speakers who enjoy English, 12 participants also have a good school grade in English which is 41 per cent out of all the speakers who mentioned that they enjoy English as a school subject. The ‘participants with an average grade’ form the second largest group amongst the ‘positive’ speakers who enjoy English as a school subject with a 28 per cent representation. These findings show that at least those who succeed in the subject in school tend to enjoy it as well and they are likely to have positive beliefs about their oral skills. But there is one exception to this rule and this exception is Student 47. Student 47 is part of the ‘undecided’ speaker category and this participant states that he does not enjoy English in school, but still has a good grade. Student 47 comments on the question 8 in the following way:

Student 47: *“I often don’t enjoy English in school. The classes tend to get very repetitive [sic] and we just do exercises and reading comprehension for the whole course.”*

The participants 34 and 47 are not the only participants who stand out from the whole participant group and Student 21 is also an exceptional speaker. Student 21 has a low grade in

English and is part of the ‘undecided’ speaker category, but he enjoys English as a school subject.

Student 21 may deviate from the rest of the participants, but he proves that moderate school success does not necessarily correlate with how a student feels about studying the subject. This is how

Student 21 explains why he likes English as a school subject:

Student 21: “- - *because someday i [sic] want to move abroad.*”

(answer to the question 8)

Student 21 is clearly motivated to study English because of his future plans, but explains in the question 15 that speaking English is “difficult” because he does not believe he speaks very good English.

To conclude the findings revealed by this variable, it is fair to say that if a student enjoys English as a school subject, it is likely that the student has a good or an average grade in English and that they also have positive beliefs about their oral skills. There some exceptions to this rule, but there are only few exceptions. The role of gender has been investigated in relation to this variable as well. It appears that the male and female participants of this study are enjoying or not enjoying English in school or they are feeling something in-between equally much: each of the three answer categories (*yes*, *no* and *undecided*) includes similar amount of answers from the female and male participants. For example, 14 female participants have answered “yes” to the question 8 and so have 15 male participants.

#### **6.2.4 The participants and the use of English outside school**

As the effect of the school context on the participants’ beliefs has now been analysed by investigating the participants’ school grades and whether or not they enjoy English as a school subject, it is time to look at how the use of English outside school might have an effect on the participants’ beliefs. The answers to the question 12, which has been used to analyse this variable, have been divided into three groups in a similar way as with other variables. The category ‘frequently’ includes the 35 participants who use English more than once a week. They form the

vast majority. ‘Occasionally’ category comprises of the participants who use English outside school once a week or more than once a month. The participants who use English ‘rarely’ outside school are the ones who use it less than once a month. There are not any participants who use English outside school once a month as was stated in the section 5.3.

Figure 16 reveals that the participants who use English more than once a week form the majority of the ‘positive’ category’s speakers. The ‘undecided’ speakers are also frequent users of English outside school. What is clear is that the ‘negative’ category’s speakers are not frequent users of English outside school. Thus, it is possible to state that the speakers who have ‘negative’ beliefs about themselves as speakers of English do not enjoy English in school, but English is not a significant part of their life outside school either.

Figure 16. *The speaker categories and the participants’ use of English outside school*

	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b><u>Total</u></b>
<b>Frequently (more than once week)</b>	23	1	11	35
<b>Occasionally (once a week or more than once a month)</b>	1	3	5	9
<b>Rarely (less than once a month)</b>	1	1	2	4
<b><u>Total</u></b>	25	5	18	48

The male and female participants of this study are both frequent users of English outside school: 17 women and 18 men use the language ‘frequently’. The participants’ school success and the use of English in other contexts than school are also linked according to the survey data: the ‘participants with a good grade’ are all frequent users of English outside school. There is one participant who uses English frequently outside school, but has a low grade in English. Student 42 has negative beliefs about her oral skills, but she does sometimes enjoy English as a school subject. Student 42 answers’ to the questions 15 and 23 explain why she is different from the other frequent users of English. She appears to have some confidence issues:

Student 42: *“It think it [speaking English] is scary because it’s difficult and I always think that I can’t speak well. Maybe I don’t trust my English skills.”*

(answer to the question 15)

*“I think it’s [speaking English] negative experience when I had to speak in front of many people because it is scary and I don’t trust myself.”*

(answer to the question 23)

It is possible that Student 42 has personal beliefs about herself that affect her school success or her beliefs about herself as a learner of English affect her school grade. It is not possible to be sure why Student 42 has negative beliefs because Student 42 should be interviewed to have more information about which factors truly affect her beliefs about herself as a learner of English.

The analysis section has found some correlations in the survey data. To confirm the truthfulness of the conclusions made in this section, the participants should be interviewed to gain more supportive evidence. Next, these findings will be discussed and the results will be compared with the results of previous research.

## 7. Discussion

The Finnish upper secondary school students studied in this study have mostly ‘positive’ or ‘undecided’ beliefs about their oral skills in English. This could be interpreted as a piece of good news: there has been a change from the days when Sallinen-Kuparinen and McCroskey (1991) conducted the study in which the Finns labeled themselves as speakers with a low communicator image. This study’s data suggests that this is no longer the case when it comes to speaking English. The Finns estimated 25 years ago that they are good communicators and that is what the results of this study show as well: 72 per cent (35 participants out of 48) of the participants describe themselves as “good communicators”.

21 years ago, Storhammar and Ailiniemi's (ibid.) study showed that the second year upper secondary school students mostly used English outside school when travelling (31 per cent) or in letter correspondence (30 per cent). Another change has happened in over 20 years: the Finns use English mostly online. The finding is supported by the results of the Special Eurobarometer 386 which show that the Internet plays a significant role as the medium for using a foreign language

these days. Also, Storhammar and Ailinpieti reported in their study that girls appeared to be more active users of English outside school (1995, 25). The data in this study shows that the male participants use English equally actively outside school as the female participants.

Brown (2009) suggests that the students tend to prefer form-focused teaching. When it comes to speaking English the students do seem to hope that they could improve on their grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary rather than their communication skills. In section 2, there was speculation that Brown's (ibid.) findings could suggest the reason why the students long for form-focused teaching is due to the age gap between the teachers and the students and their different academic backgrounds. The results of this study may offer another explanation: the students may feel this way because they are already using a lot of authentic English material (TV series, books and so forth) outside school and that the communicational approach does not provide them with any new type of information that they are not already receiving outside school. Some participants expressed that they feel that the teaching of English focuses too heavily on grammar (see Student 12, Student 20, Student 34 in section 5.5) and that the communicational approach should be favoured instead. The 49<sup>th</sup> participant of this study, a Canadian exchange student, brings up the issue as well in her survey answers and she has made an observation that supports the claim made by Students 12, 20 and 34:

Student 49: *"I have heard from my Finnish friends that they think English is hard because it focuses on grammar more than speaking"*  
(answer to the question 25)

Ke and Cahayni (2009) suggest that international communicational habits should be taught in foreign language classes and English should actually be rather taught as ELF (=English as Lingua Franca) instead of EFL and the results of this study support this idea. Ten participants of this study reported that they are not happy with their pronunciation and they might see their pronunciation skills in a more positive light if the teaching of English would not focus on the examples provided by the inner circle speakers. Student 4 mentions (full quotation in section 5.5) that he thinks that the American accent should be taught in addition to the British accent, but does

not bring up the possibility that perhaps Finnish speakers should not try to imitate either of those two accents. As the Canadian exchange student states:

Student 49: *“I think that the most important thing is that you can speak and be understood, so maybe that should be the focus.”*  
(answer to the question 25 continued)

The correlation analysis done in the previous section aimed at finding if they are key factors or sources which might explain differences in the learners' beliefs. On the basis of the findings that were made, it is possible to make suggestion how the teaching of English should be changed. It is clear that those who have negative beliefs need to be encouraged to use English more outside school. Students do not necessarily realise in which ways they can add more English input into their lives without making drastic changes to their normal habits: it is possible to listen to English radio stations via the Internet which play similar music as the Finnish stations and many of the celebrity gossips covered in the Finnish tabloids are also reported in English publications as well. The female participants appeared to be more critical towards themselves and thus, they may need more positive feedback about their oral skills than males. However, participants of any gender deserve equal treatment.

A matter which has been discussed earlier from the point of view of the current research on learner beliefs is the use of surveys to study learner beliefs. The current research (see Barcelos 2003 or de Costa 2011, for example) does not support the use of surveys to study learner beliefs. The reasons that led to the use of a survey in this study were discussed already in the sections 4.1 and 4.2. Now that the results have been analysed, it is possible to analyse the survey itself. The survey used in this study proved to have some aspects which worked well and some that did not work so well.

The survey and the participants' answers show that the participants did not hesitate to share personal information about themselves: one participant explained openly that stuttering is an issue and there were participants who were not too afraid to state that they are not happy with their oral skills and others who even mentioned that they consider themselves to be better in English than



an average student of their age. The survey of this study is different from the popular BALLI survey (see Appendix 2) not only because it has open questions, but because of the data that the open questions reveal. The participants are allowed to use their own words to explain their beliefs and their own words represent them in the analysis even with the possible grammar errors they have made.

As none of the participants have been interviewed in addition to the survey, it is not possible to say whether the participants would have been willing to share the same information in a face-to-face interview. What is clear is that the survey allowed the participants to tell about their issues and beliefs without their answers being linked to their face or name. This way only one session was needed to collect data from 48 (or 49 the exchange student included) participants. To say the least, using a survey is an efficient way to collect data.

The survey of this study is not perfect and there are many things that require improving. Firstly, the amount of data that was collected with this survey serves the purposes of this study more than sufficiently. It would have been possible to investigate other correlations than the ones that were presented in this study. For example, the relationship between what the participants considered their strengths (question 19) and what they would like to improve about their oral skills (question 21) would make an interesting matter to study.

Secondly, it seems that there were too many question types in the survey. The analysis of the questions 14, 17 and 19 in particular was challenging because the participants appeared to have been confused about how to answer them. The participants had been instructed how to answer those questions before filling in the survey and the instructions in the survey tell the participant to read the instructions for each question carefully. When the questions appear similar, it is understandable that the participant has assumed that the question should be answered in the similar way as the other one before it.

The survey could be developed further as the formula of having closed and open questions seems to work well. However, there should not be more than perhaps two types of closed

questions: closed questions in which the participant is asked to mark “x” next the appropriate option(s) and questions in which the participant should number the options given to them, but the way the options are numbered should be consistent. Some of the questions could be deleted as they did not prove to provide any crucial information: the question 7 is in the survey because it would have been possible to investigate if those who have taken the oral skills course have a more positive attitude towards their oral skills than others. None of the participants had taken the course, though. Also, the additional questions of the questions 10 and 11 could have been simplified: the situations in which the participants who have lived abroad had used English did not provide any significant information as in their answers the participants explained that they had used English in their everyday life in general. The 10 question could simply ask if the participant had travelled abroad and used English there instead of specifying the length of the journey. The participants had answered the question even if they had travelled away only for a week and some answered “no” to the question even though in the question 12 they mentioned that they used English abroad. The point of these questions was to see if the Finnish upper secondary school students have experience of using English in authentic situations.

## **8. Conclusion**

The main question of the study asks what kind of beliefs Finnish upper secondary students have about their spoken skills in English. This study shows that the students can be labelled into three speaker categories according to the beliefs they have about their skills. The categories are: ‘positive’, ‘negative’ or ‘undecided’. The results of this study show that the students have mainly positive beliefs about their oral skills in English. A clear minority of the participants has negative beliefs. In addition to the positive speakers, the “undecided” speakers form another majority. These participants are happy with their skills to some extent, but believe that there are aspects that they need to improve on before they are able to say that they are content with their oral skills.

The survey that was used in this study did not only aim at discovering what kind of “believers” the participants of this study are, but it also aimed at finding out which aspects of oral skills the participants consider important. This was the main point of the first subquestion of this study as well. The participants consider the ability to communicate efficiently the most important aspect related to oral skills. This is a positive finding since the participants describe themselves as good communicators. The importance of wide vocabulary and fluency were brought up by the participants as well.

The second subquestion stated in the introduction section was interested in finding out the strengths and weaknesses of the students who participated in this study. The participants considered vocabulary to be the most important area of their spoken skills which they would like to improve on. Again, communication and confidence when it comes to speaking English are not of concern to the participants and neither is grammar as only a few participants mentioned that they believe that these are the aspects that they need to work on.

The participants expressed that they are happy with the goals set for them by the Finnish and European educational institutions, Finland’s Ministry of Education and Culture and *CEFR*. The general sentiment amongst the participants is that the goals are reasonable and that the students of their age should be able to reach them or at least those are the kind of goals they should be aiming for. The suggestions to alter the goals include statements about how grammar should not play such a large part in language teaching as it does now, according to some participants.

Even though the majority of the participants has positive beliefs about their oral skills and they are happy with their skills, it is important to give some attention to those who are unsure or have a negative beliefs and the reasons which have caused the insecurity and the negative feelings. Also, the concerns of the ‘positive’ speakers should be taken into consideration. The participants are keen to improve their vocabulary and pronunciation. It is perhaps worth considering if there should be more emphasis on teaching communicational strategies which would help to cope in situations where a speaker feels that their vocabulary is insufficient for the speech event. One solution to help

the students to feel more confident about their pronunciation might be presenting them with speakers of English who are not only inner circle speakers, but from various backgrounds and nationalities.

Hu and Tian (2012, 239) mention that not too many “studies focus on the similarities or differences in beliefs between teachers and students regarding second language learning strategies”. The data discovered in this thesis could be used if another study would ask teachers similar questions, but the focus would be on the teaching strategies that they use and the beliefs they have about different learning strategies. The comparisons could be made with the results of this study and it would be possible to see whether students' personal views about learning and teachers' ideas about teaching correlate.

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## Appendix 1 Survey form

### Survey: Speaking in English and my thoughts on it

The purpose of this study is to collect data for a pro gradu thesis in English Philology. This study investigates what kinds of thoughts upper secondary school students have about their oral skills in English. The questions in this survey aim at finding out what the students consider important when it comes to English oral skills.

The answers will be handled anonymously which means that the survey does not ask you to write down your name. Thus, no names will be mentioned in the thesis either. This way the identity of the respondent will be kept unknown. The information collected in this study will not be handed over to a third party.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact:

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#### Instructions

Here are some instructions on how to fill in the survey:

1. In this survey, there are five parts. Please, answer ALL the parts and ALL the questions.
2. There are different types of questions: some questions ask you to write your answer using your own words and some ask you to choose from options given to you. There are questions where you can choose more than one option. PLEASE READ THE WHOLE QUESTION CAREFULLY so will know how you should answer.
3. If there is not enough space for your answer, please, do not hesitate to ask for more paper to continue your answer. You may also use the blank page of the questionnaire (the last page). If you use extra paper or space, put the number of the question that you are answering in front of the answer.
4. If there is something you do not understand or need help with, raise your hand.
5. Once you are ready, please, turn over the survey on your desk so that a blank page is in front of you. The surveys will be collected from you.

#### ABBREVIATIONS:

etc. = jne. = ja niin edelleen

e.g. = esimerkiksi

## Should I ask the permission to hand over the answers to a third party here?

### Part 1: General information about you

1. Age (Please, write down your age in years using numbers):

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2. Gender?

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3. Nationality?

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4. First language(s)? (The language you have learned to speak first. If you have learned more than one language at the same time, please, write which languages you have learned from birth):

5. Other languages spoken at home? (in addition to your first language(s).)

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### Part 2: Use of English in school

6. How many years have you studied English?

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7. Have you done English course 8 (oral skills course)? Please, mark 'X' next the appropriate option.

yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

8. Do you enjoy English as a school subject? Please, explain why or why not?

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9. What is your English grade at the moment? Please, write down the last English grade you have been given.

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### Part 3: Use of English outside school

10. Have you lived in a country where you have used English as the main language for communication? Please, mark 'X' next the appropriate option.

yes \_\_\_\_\_

no \_\_\_\_\_

If you answered 'yes', please, specify where you lived and for how long. Also, please tell in what kind of situations did you use English in the country:

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11. Have you travelled to a country where you have used English as the language for communication and stayed there for a longer period of time (two weeks or more)? Please, mark 'X' next the appropriate option.

yes \_\_\_\_\_

no \_\_\_\_\_

If you answered 'yes', please, specify where did you travel, for how long and what was the purpose of the trip (e.g. . Also, please tell in what kind of situations did you use English in the country:

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12. Where do you mostly use English? Please, mark 'X' next the appropriate option. You may choose more than one option.

in school \_\_\_\_\_

at home \_\_\_\_\_

at hobbies \_\_\_\_\_

when abroad \_\_\_\_\_

on the Internet \_\_\_\_\_

somewhere else, please specify?

---

If you chose more than one option, please write places here below in such an order that the place where you use English the most is marked with 1. etc. (e.g. 1. in school, 2. when abroad etc.)

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13. How frequently (=kuinka usein) do you use English outside school? Please mark "X" next to the most appropriate option.

more than once a week \_\_\_\_\_  
 once a week \_\_\_\_\_  
 more than once a month \_\_\_\_\_  
 once a month \_\_\_\_\_  
 less than once a month \_\_\_\_\_

14. Please mark the options with numbers from 1-4 with 1= 'most frequent' and 4 ='least frequent'. When you use English, do you mostly...

hear \_\_\_\_\_

speak \_\_\_\_\_

read \_\_\_\_\_

write in \_\_\_\_\_

English?

#### Part 4: English oral skills and beliefs

15. Do you feel that speaking English is...

fun \_\_\_\_\_

easy \_\_\_\_\_

enjoyable \_\_\_\_\_

makes me nervous but I'm fine once I get started \_\_\_\_\_

makes me nervous and uncomfortable \_\_\_\_\_

difficult \_\_\_\_\_

scary \_\_\_\_\_

something else, what?

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Please, choose the options that describe your feelings best. You may choose more than one.

Please, explain what it is that makes speaking English fun or scary etc. (from your point of view) ?

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16. Do you think speaking English is...

an important skill \_\_\_\_\_

not an important skill \_\_\_\_\_

Please, mark 'X' next the appropriate option.

17. What do you think is important when speaking in English? Please, choose **three** options by marking the most important option with '1' and so on.

to speak fluently \_\_\_\_

to have a wide vocabulary \_\_\_\_

to use language that is grammatically correct \_\_\_\_

knowing how to pronounce English \_\_\_\_

being able to communicate efficiently (=tehokkaasti) \_\_\_\_

being able to communicate appropriately according to the context (e.g. knowing how to be polite in English) \_\_\_\_

something else, what? \_\_\_\_

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18. Please, choose which options which describe you as a speaker of English. Choose the appropriate options by marking 'X' next to them. You may choose more than one.

fluent \_\_\_\_

grammatical (you pay close attention to grammar when speaking) \_\_\_\_

good communicator \_\_\_\_

brave \_\_\_\_

shy \_\_\_\_

insecure \_\_\_\_

scared \_\_\_\_

something else, what

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19. What are **your** strengths when it comes to speaking English? Please, mark '1' to your best strength and so on.

vocabulary \_\_\_\_

fluency \_\_\_\_

pronunciation \_\_\_\_

communication (non-verbal skills, e.g. using body language) \_\_\_\_

attitude \_\_\_\_

something else, what? \_\_\_\_

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20. How do you think you have gained (=saavutta) your strengths?

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21. What is it that you would like to improve about your oral skills? And why?

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22. All in all, are you happy with your oral skills in English? Please, explain why or why not?

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23. What kind of experiences have affected your feelings towards speaking in English? You can describe both positive and negative experiences.

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### Part 5: The Finnish National curriculum and its goals

*The Finnish National Curriculum* (=opetussuunnitelma) is a foundation for all teaching happening in Finnish schools. The curriculum is designed by the Finnish National Board of Education (=Opetushallitus). The curriculum defines the goals for teaching which happens in different school subjects.

The Finnish National Curriculum says that the upper secondary school students should reach the level of B 2.1 in spoken skills of a foreign language which they have started studying as their first foreign language. The level B 2.1 is one of the levels in *Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR)*. *CEFR* defines what kind of skills students need in understanding, speaking and writing a language. In *CEFR* there are levels from A-C and C is the most advanced level. For a student to reach B 2.1 they need to:

- be able to interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible.
- be able to take actively part in discussions in familiar contexts and justify their opinions
- be able to give clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects which relates to something that they are interested in.

- be able to explain their opinions in and is able to analyze an issue from various viewpoints.

24. How do these goals (described above) sound to you?

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25. Is there something you would change about the goals? Why or why not would you change them?

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26. Any further comments:

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**27. Final comments on the whole survey:**

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## Appendix 2 BALLI Survey form

Copied from: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/cels/essays/secondlanguage/GoodLanguageLearnerTraitsSThompson.pdf> pp. 20-23

### BALLI Survey

1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.
2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.
4. English is a (.....) language.
5. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.
6. People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.
7. It is important to speak English with an excellent pronunciation.
8. It is necessary to know about English speaking cultures in order to speak English.
9. You shouldn't say anything in English, until you can say it correctly.
10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.
11. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.
12. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.
13. I enjoy practising English with the native speakers I meet.
14. It is OK to guess, if you don't know a word in English.
15. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well?
16. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.
17. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary words.
18. It is important to repeat and practise a lot.
19. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.
20. People in my country feel that it is important to speak English.
21. I feel timid (shy) when speaking English with other people.
22. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.
23. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.
24. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know the British / Americans better.
25. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.
26. It is important to practise with cassettes or tapes.
27. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other subjects.
28. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language.
29. If I learn English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.
30. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.
31. I want to learn to speak English very well.
32. I would like to have British/American (English-speaking) friends.
33. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.
34. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.
35. So far I have been learning English for (.....) years.
36. My age when I first started learning English:
37. My level of English:

**Answer Sheet**

1. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
2. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
3. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
4. ☐ Very difficult ☐ Difficult ☐ Medium ☐ Easy ☐ Very easy
5. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
6. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
7. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
8. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
9. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
10. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
11. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
12. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
13. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
14. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
15. ☐ Less than a year ☐ 1-2 years ☐ 2-3 years ☐ 3-5 years ☐ You cannot learn a language one hour a day.
16. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
17. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
18. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
19. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
20. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
21. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
22. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
23. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
24. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
25. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
26. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
27. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
28. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
29. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
30. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
31. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
32. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
33. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
34. Strongly Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Completely Disagree
35. \_\_\_\_\_
36. \_\_\_\_\_
37. ☐ Elementary ☐ Lower-Intermediate ☐ Intermediate ☐ Upper-Intermediate ☐ Advanced  
☐ Fluent